The Lamb and His Monster

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/40347705.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Bella Crawford, Rinaldo Pazzi, Original Characters
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universe - Different First Meeting, Firenze | Florence, College Student Will Graham, Medical Student Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal Lecter is Il Mostro, Canon-Typical Violence, Cannibalism, Fluff and Angst, Semi Slow Burn, Courting Through Murder (Hannibal), Falling In Love, Background Jack/Bella, Featuring Hannibal on a motorcycle, And Winston!, Anal Sex, Oral Sex, Switching, Deepthroating, Rimming, Light Bondage, playing fast and loose with canon
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Author's Favorites
Stats:	Published: 2022-07-16 Completed: 2023-04-03 Words: 104,538 Chapters: 15/15

The Lamb and His Monster

by petrodactyl352

Summary

Will has always been drawn to the macabre. The proverbial flame upon which he has burnt his fragile moth's wings time and time again, it's why he had fallen in love with Florence and why he alone seems to see the beauty in the grisly but exquisite work of Il Mostro.

But when he meets a young man in the Uffizi Gallery whose sketchbook is filled with nothing but page upon page of intricate renditions of the *Primavera* drawn in reverent strokes of pencil, he realizes he may not be alone in his fascination with the Monster. As they lift veils and scale forts and slowly begin to understand each other, Will gets a taste of exactly how bright the cinders of intrigue can burn—and how quickly they can kindle into an inferno of obsession.

Notes

a take on what might have happened if will was around when hannibal became a man in florence, played a part in it and maybe had a becoming of his own, too.

chapter titles are all from dante's inferno.

my tumblr
fic playlist

Una Selva Oscura

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They do not smile when I greet them. That is their first mistake.

Signora Ricci thrusts her hand at me haughtily, and I do not miss the upward curl of her sneer when my lips brush across her knuckles. Her husband is no less cold, his handshake brief and disinterested. Neither of them ask for my name, and when I introduce myself nonetheless their disdain is clear; they want little to do with a student, much less a foreigner.

I attempt to allow them a second chance, congratulating them on their beautiful collection and the considerable amount of money their auction had raised, but they do not take it. Instead they turn away, bestowing their attention upon other, more worthy attendees. Banal politicians and obnoxiously wealthy patrons whose money is their only merit.

Before they go Signor Ricci seals his and his wife's fates with a single snide remark: "Your Italian accent is charming, straniero*. Maybe if you keep practicing, someday you can hold your own in this country."*

My smile fades as I watch them go, watch them mingle and laugh and drink. They do not notice my eyes on them for the remainder of the night, blinded and dazzled as they are by the praise lavished upon them, praise they lap up almost as eagerly as they do the drink.

I slip out the door as the crowd begins to thin, glancing at my watch. It's nearly midnight, and the street outside is empty in the lateness of the hour. It makes it easier, to stay cloaked in the shadows that have gathered thick and heavy near the doors and wait for them to leave.

Drunk both on self-congratulation and champagne their laughter rings off the cobbled street as they get into a taxi, Signora Ricci's dress already beginning to slip down her shoulders beneath her husband's questing hands. Preoccupied as they are with each other, they do not notice me following them home.

They live in an affluent part of Florence, the tall buildings around me flaunting archways embellished with delicate carvings and heavy stained-glass windows that spill colored light onto the street below. The tall polished wooden doors seem to stretch high and higher still, their tops shrouded in darkness almost as if to belittle whoever approaches.

Sports cars are parked along the pavement sleek and incongruous among it all, their high-tech security systems winking in points of bright scarlet as if daring passers-by to try and touch them. But my quarry is not something so trivial; what I am here for is far more precious than a trinket such as a car.

They are careless in their lack of inconspicuousness, Signor and Signora Ricci, and even more so in their distractedness; I make quick work of their locks and let myself into their home, leaving the door open behind me.

I follow the trail of discarded clothes that lead to their bedroom, its door slightly ajar. They do not recognize me at first, but after reality bleeds through at last there is the usual string of pleas and promises and threats, cries of "we have money" and "we will give you anything you want". It serves no purpose but to wear my patience thin and thinner.

Signora Ricci is first. I slit her throat while her husband watches, the rag tied tight between his teeth silencing his scream. As she falls to her knees, choking and pressing futile hands to the gash in her neck with blood spurting between her fingers in gouts of scarlet I strangle Signor Ricci with an arm around his throat. Their hearts give out within seconds of each other.

I make neat work of them both, and it's quick as well as quiet. When it's done I carry their corpses out the front door and down the steps to the street outside, and nobody sees me leave.

Signora Ricci is sublime as Chloris, flowers streaming from her lips as she breathes spring roses in death. Her husband is hovering above her as biting and cold as Zephyrus himself, his arms at once possessive and tender as they reach out to take her for his own. I drape and adorn and position them to perfection with all the concentration and inspiration of an artist at work at his easel, painting upon the canvas of their bodies.

They were an attractive couple in life, but I think they are more beautiful like this. Eyes open and empty, their limbs still and unmoving with careful incisions hidden by tulle and cotton. With all those shallow, vapid thoughts of greed and sycophancy emptied from their heads.

I have made art from their deaths, transformed them—and through their transformation I reveal them for what they are. Not victims, not people, not even prey. Merely two pigs for me to slaughter.

I stand and survey the masterpiece that has come together beneath my careful, reverent hands, my pockets weighed down with her heart and his kidney tucked away neatly. It is the price they pay, the price I have demanded from them, for the impudence and discourtesy they showed me. And to think that none of this need have happened had they not simply smiled and greeted me.

I leave nothing behind, not a fingerprint nor a footstep. I go as quietly as I had come, a ghost haunting the streets of the city, and wait for my work of art to be discovered. This is my design.

The pendulum swings forward one last time, and Will opens his eyes.

For a moment the world tilts around him as if he were standing upon the bow of a ship caught in a tempest, a maelstrom churning the sea below. His vision renders itself as a blur of forest green and red and gold, and he swallows down the swell of nausea that claws its way up his throat.

Slowly, he returns to reality from… wherever he had been. He still isn't entirely sure where he goes when he closes his eyes and lets the pendulum swing backward and backward and backward again, lets it drown his consciousness until he is standing in the body of a killer. Watching himself murder and maim and mutilate, watching himself carry out their design.

This particular killer's design is unlike anything he's ever seen. Meticulous and elegant, graceful and controlled, almost ruthless in its precise detail. To call it *murder* would take away from the truth of it all, take away from the *art* of it all. It's not murder, it's something far more sophisticated.

Il Mostro di Firenze. It's an apt moniker. Whatever Il Mostro is, he is the only one, and he is not—he *cannot* be—human.

It hadn't always been killers. He remembers the first time it had happened, walking down the cracked pavement on a sticky Louisiana summer afternoon and spotting a bird hopping across the street towards him. He had stopped to watch it, feeling a smile spreading across his face as it had neared him.

It had only been a step or so away when a pickup truck rounded the corner with the screech of rubber on tarmac, so quickly that neither he nor the bird had had time to react. He can still see it in his head, its frail hollow body giving way beneath the crushing force of the tires and the crunch of bone splintering, blood staining brown and gray feathers and its agonized scream drowned out by the roar of the truck's engine. Will had screamed, too.

He remembers collapsing in the middle of the road with his knobbly little-boy knees bent up under him and his too-big schoolbag dragging on the ground, shaking hands scooping up the bird's broken body and cradling it to his chest. He had dragged himself to the curb and sobbed, the bird's pain becoming his pain, hardly able to breathe as it overcame him.

His dad found him like that hours later, long after afternoon had waned into evening. He had picked him up in his arms, shivering and crying with his head bent over a dead bird lying in his hands, and carried him home. He had wiped his tears and helped him bury the bird in their backyard, and that night as he tucked Will into bed he told him that he had a big heart, too big for a world as cruel as the one they lived in. He made Will promise him that he would never let anything or anyone shrink it.

But then it happened again, and again and again. The fifth time Will's dad got a call from his elementary school teacher telling him that his son had another panic attack during recess, he took Will to the hospital.

The doctors called it an empathy disorder.

Too many mirror neurons, he had been told. They had never gone away like they were supposed to, lurking unbidden in his brain. And now it has rendered him a human mirror, reflecting everyone he sees back to them. His father had told him it was a gift, but most days it doesn't feel like one.

As he had gotten older it had gone from birds to dogs to people, but it is the worst kind of people he seems to understand the best. It repulses him, but somewhere shoved deep inside him is the tiniest bud of admiration, of veneration. Appreciation for their skill and ruthlessness.

Will blinks the blurriness from his vision as the world falls back into place around him—Botticelli's *Primavera* hanging on the wall in front of him and the peculiar hardness of the familiar bench beneath him—and the first thing he realizes is that he is no longer alone.

There's a young man sitting on the bench beside him, face upturned towards the painting. A sketchbook is balanced across his thighs, open on a blank sheet with a charcoal pencil tucked into its gutter. He must have come in sometime in the last few minutes.

Knowing it would be impolite to stare Will glances back at *Primavera*, his eyes finding Chloris and Zephyrus at the far right of the painting before they lower to the now-crumpled newspaper clutched in his lap. The black-and-white photo of the grisly crime scene peeking from between his fingers is grainy and unclear, but it had been enough for him to recognize the arrangement of the bodies.

He lifts the corner of the newspaper, glancing over the brighter, glossier photos he had tucked into its sheets. He isn't supposed to have them; he'd swiped them off his professor's desk, having overheard him on the phone with the police and realizing he had been asked to consult on Il Mostro's latest display. Using them would get him uncomfortably close to letting the Monster into his head, but the temptation had been too great to resist.

He can see the crime scene clearer in these photos, and their color lends itself to the vividity of his imagination. The blood is so bright a red, a garish smear across pale, waxy skin stretched tight over jutting bones, and it transfixes him for a moment. Even the brutality of it has been done with such care.

The soft scratch of charcoal on paper draws his attention once more to the man sitting beside him, his head now bent over his sketchbook. Long, elegantly boned fingers wield the pencil expertly, and within seconds the nymphs and gods in the painting begin to bloom across the paper, not a stroke out of place.

In an abrupt movement the man stops sketching and turns his head, his eyes lifting to meet Will's. Seized suddenly by the man's mahogany gaze he freezes, a deer caught in headlights, and finds himself unable to look away.

It's always been… difficult for Will to look people in the eye. It's too uncomfortably intimate, too revealing and at once restricting. He sees everything about a person in their eyes —they are laid bare before him in the nakedness of their own gazes, and it registers as a cacophony in Will's head that's almost overwhelming in its intensity.

But Will sees… *nothing* in this man's eyes. They are blank, unreadable and wholly, entirely empty.

And rather than feeling unsettled or alarmed, the first thing Will feels is relief.

Heady waves of it roll over him, each one leaving him breathless in its wake. He's grown so accustomed to seeing that he had almost forgotten what it's like to look—just *look* at someone in all its devastating simplicity. To look and not have his empathy take hold, shackles around his wrists that weigh him down and force someone else's state of mind onto him.

The second thing he feels is the beginning of a peculiar sort of curiosity.

He finds himself oddly mesmerized by the man's face, comprised almost entirely of angles and edges as it is without even an ounce of softness—with the striking exception of his mouth, the supple lines of his lips curving gently downward.

He's handsome if not somewhat distinctively so, and impeccably dressed in a magnificent three-piece navy suit that clings to his broad frame like a second skin. The waistcoat alone probably costs more than Will's whole apartment, furnishings included.

Will is the first to look away, feeling heat rise to his cheeks as he glances back down at the newspaper, his fingers interwound so tightly in his lap that their tips turn white. He feels suddenly self-conscious in his plain blue button-down shirt and mud-splattered shoes, jacketless with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and effectively putting his skinny forearms on full display.

The silence that envelops them is once more punctuated by the quiet scratch of pencil on paper, and slowly Will's clenched muscles begin to relax. He lets out a breath, looking back at the painting.

He imagines Il Mostro sitting exactly where he is now, seeking eyes roving reverently over the decadent brushstrokes and finally falling upon Chloris and Zephyrus. Imagines the quiet pleasure awakening in his chest as he realizes he has found the inspiration for his next spectacle, imagines him closing his eyes just as Will had closed his and seeing himself kill them in his head over and over and over—

"And so the cold biting hands of the wind reach and long for the warmth of Spring," the young man beside him murmurs in English, his words lilting with a soft, musical accent that Will can't immediately place.

When Will turns to look at him he's looking back, lips curved upward in a smile. Will feels his eyes drop automatically, unable to hold his gaze—though not for the reasons he usually does.

The man seems to notice, his brow arching. "Not fond of eye contact, are you?"

"Eyes are—distracting." Will's gaze doesn't budge from where it's fixed on the gold button winking at him from the man's collar. "You see too much, you don't see enough…"

"They say that the eyes are the windows to the soul," the man points out archly.

"You know, I've never found that to be quite true," Will says. "They're less windows and more rabbit holes in my experience."

"Through the looking glass and into Wonderland where madness reigns supreme?"

The words startle a laugh out of him. "Something like that."

The man's smile widens when he laughs, almost as if in an involuntary response to hearing it. A moment later his eyes drift down to the newspaper still clutched in Will's hands, and his smile turns crooked.

"Appalling, isn't it?" he asks softly. "To do such a thing to innocent people."

"No," Will finds himself saying, the words dragging themselves out of him against his will, and he sounds almost defensive. "Not really. It's… what he's done, it's taking death and making it into something greater. Elevating it to art."

"I suppose displaying one's enemies has its appeal," the man concedes. "It certainly does, in many cultures."

"Oh, no," Will says. "These aren't Il Mostro's enemies. They're merely pests he's swatted. This displaying them, the mutilation, the removal of organs—it's a public humiliation."

"Their reward for their cruelty."

"Oh, he doesn't have a problem with cruelty," Will says, the words coming out on the heels of a humorless scoff. "The reward is for… undignified behavior."

“Takes their organs away because in his mind, they don’t deserve them,” the man says, and Will’s eyes finally snap upward to meet his.

He’s looking back, his face entirely still, and there’s something stirring at last in the fathomless bronze of his eyes. Will can’t quite decipher what it is, and he realizes with a thrill of something dark and dangerous that he wants to. For once, he *wants* to see. He wants to dig into whatever it is behind this man’s eyes with his bare hands, empathy be damned, and tangle himself inside his head until he’s completely and utterly lost.

“Yes,” Will says. “That’s exactly it.”

“And how is it you know so much about Il Mostro di Firenze?” the man asks softly, his eyes glittering. “And what brings you here to the Uffizi Gallery and the *Primavera* today of all days?”

Will laughs, realizing suddenly how this all must sound. “Whoever Il Mostro is,” he says, “he’s certainly wise enough not to be hanging around somewhere he knows he can be traced back to. And he’s almost definitely far more refined than I could ever hope to be.”

The man smiles again, and there’s something distinctly amused about the glint in his eye. “What makes you say that?”

“His work, his design,” Will says, gesturing with the newspaper. “It’s all so finely done. It’s decadent, rich. The attention to detail is striking, and not a single thing he’s done isn’t deliberate. Someone like that can only have the most exquisite taste, and taste like that tends to bleed into every sphere of your life. Food, clothes, music, wine. He demands nothing less than the pinnacle of whatever he comes into contact with.”

The young man looks at Will long and hard at that, and there’s something almost scrutinous about the way his eyes flick over Will’s face. As if he were dissecting him and examining him part by part, turning each one over in his hands before replacing it where it had been. The weight of his gaze is a physical thing, like fingernails dragging down the inside of his skull.

“You admire the Monster,” the man says finally. “Do you not?”

“I—” Will fidgets with the paper. “A little. What he does, it’s so… singular. Focused and elegant and perfect. It’s hard not to appreciate his design.”

“It takes a keener eye than most, to see the world as you do,” the man says musingly, leaning back. “Such an ability must come with a hefty price.”

“One could argue the ability itself is the price.”

He inclines his head, a sliver of some strange expression flickering over his handsome face. “Indeed one could.”

“Your sketchbook,” Will says after a moment, feeling suddenly and inexplicably emboldened, “may I see it?”

The man doesn't seem to mind the abruptness of the question, nor does he hesitate even slightly before he proffers his book to Will. Their fingers brush ever so softly as he takes it, his skin warm and smooth against Will's, and the contact though accidental makes the place they had touched prickle in its wake. Will draws back quickly and looks down and away, flipping through the sketchbook—and his breath catches.

It's filled with page upon page of nothing but Chloris and Zephyrus, rendered careful and precise and detailed. Each page is a different interpretation—the shading, the lighting, their expressions as they gaze at each other. Rapture and fear and desire, ecstasy and hatred and love. All of it captured perfectly with the most delicate of strokes.

Flipping each page and looking at the sketch after sketch of just the two of them it dawns on Will slow but sure that he may not be alone in his fascination with Il Mostro's design.

"These are beautiful." He allows his fingers to trace over one of the renditions, this one depicting the two with lust burning like fire in their eyes and in the clawing intent of their hands reaching for each other. "How long have you been…"

"Weeks," the man says with a self-deprecating duck of his head, scooting closer to Will on the bench so as to see the page better. "I found myself singularly fascinated by Botticelli's depiction of Chloris and Zephyrus."

"As singularly fascinated as Il Mostro?" His fingertip follows the arcing line of the flowers falling gracefully from Chloris' mouth.

"Perhaps not that fascinated." A moment later the man's hand joins Will's on the sheet, tracing Zephyrus' hands clenched in desire. Will can almost imagine them shaking in his overwhelming need to touch her, to feel her skin against his. "I have always been drawn to details more often than not overlooked."

"Easier to allow them to get lost in the grand scheme of things," Will murmurs absently.

"For other people, perhaps," the man says, and Will looks up at him, almost startled—but his eyes are still trained down at the sketchbook, a divot appearing between his brows. His chestnut hair slips from where it had been neatly combed back and falls across his eyes, and Will clenches his fingers into fists to fight the impulse to reach out and sweep it back again.

"You and I, we see too much," the man continues, and Will realizes he isn't looking at the drawing but rather at Will's fingers splayed over the paper, and there's something quiet and thoughtful in his gaze. "And I fear sight so acute is more often than not a curse rather than a blessing."

Will looks up just as he does the same and their gazes lock and hold, and Will doesn't think he would be able to look away if he tried. He opens his mouth to speak—and then the deep, rich toll of a clock sounds outside, chiming three.

The suddenness of it makes him start, and belatedly realizing how late he is for class Will pulls away, the brief spell that had stretched between the two of them breaking as he

withdraws quickly. He hands the young man's sketchbook back to him, offering him a sheepish smile.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I have to go. I didn't realize it had gotten so late already."

"Of course; I won't keep you." He doesn't smile, but there's a kind of softness in his gaze that feels warmer somehow. "It was lovely to meet you."

"You as well." He ducks his head, standing and grabbing his bag where it rests on the floor. *"Buongiorno, signor."*

"Buongiorno."

Turning on his heel Will leaves the gallery quickly, turning the corner outside. In his haste to leave he nearly collides with an older man lurking near the doorway, and they both take a quick step back in unison. The man reaches out to steady Will with a hand on his arm and his grip is surprisingly solid, stronger than he would have let on at first glance. There's something watchful in his gaze, like the careful intent of a predator stalking its prey.

He smiles down at Will. Though it's a kind expression it doesn't quite reach his eyes, which remain flinty and shrewd. "It is a beautiful painting, no?" he asks in Italian, his voice low and gravelly.

"Scuse," Will mutters without answering, and brushes past him.

He puts his head down and weaves briskly through the labyrinthine passageways of the gallery, breaking into a run once he finally emerges into the light rain that's beginning to fall outside. It's only after he's halfway down the next street that he realizes he had forgotten to ask for the young man's name.

Hannibal closes his sketchbook, feeling the pencil he had tucked between the pages as a raised bump against his fingers. He rubs a fingertip across the indent, looking at the painting but not really seeing it, lost in thought.

He can feel something simmering slow and hot in his veins, something he has not felt in a long, long time. People have always inspired a certain spectrum of emotions in him: boredom and rancor, irritation or mild annoyance at best. But whatever it is he had felt while speaking to the quiet American boy, it had been none of those.

What he had felt instead were the beginnings of a fervent, consuming curiosity.

The boy had looked rather like one of the priceless works of art in the gallery come to life, with that angelically fine-boned face and Cupid's-bow lips, hair like curls of dark chocolate and eyes like a crisp midwinter sky. There had been something beautifully broken in those eyes, like the fragile, delicate beauty of a dead bird lying with its neck snapped and its bloody wings spread open wide.

Hannibal wonders what it might be like for those eyes to see him. To *know* him.

A shiver of dark pleasure rolls over him at the thought, the burn of intent beginning to take root inside him. He knows with a ruthless sort of certainty that even if he searches for another thousand years, he will never find anyone like that boy again.

There is a sort of acknowledgment that comes with the realization—that he most certainly wants something from this boy. That he wants something *for* him. And he will do everything in his power to give it, and to get it.

Standing, he turns and makes to tuck his sketchbook back into his satchel when he pauses, confusion tugging at him for a moment in the unfamiliarity of it against his fingers. Understanding is quick to follow—in his haste to leave the boy must have taken Hannibal's bag, leaving his own behind instead. Hannibal does not begrudge him the mistake; they look quite similar, and he had left in a hurry.

The fabric of the boy's bag is worn and faded, the leather cracked and frayed. Slipping a hand into it, Hannibal draws out one of the heavy books inside, glancing at the cover. It's a hard-bound copy of Jung's *Gegenwart und Zukunft*, old and well-loved. A psychology student, then. Or something resembling one.

He examines the spine, a finger running down the creased center. There's no library code, so it must be his own copy. He carefully flips the cover aside, and the book falls open on the title page. At the very top near the corner of the yellowing sheet he spots it, written in stark black ink in a cramped, scrawling hand.

Will Graham, 1993.

Hannibal smiles, letting his finger trace over the inked letters carefully. *Will.* A fitting name for his clever, cunning boy.

He lingers and allows himself a few more minutes with the painting, committing every meticulous brushstroke to memory with his eyes closed. Only this time he sees a slender figure sitting on the bench before it, darting eyes like open wounds in his young, devastating face.

With a renewed vigor Hannibal opens his eyes, standing and turning away from the *Primavera* with Will's book still clutched in his hand and his bag slung over his shoulder. He leaves the gallery, moving quickly past the lone man standing outside with a polite nod in his direction. The man dips his chin in return as he steps aside, letting Hannibal pass.

And in his efforts not to let Will stray too far ahead he doesn't notice the man watching him, his calculating eyes following him all the way down the corridor until he rounds the corner and disappears from view.

Chapter End Notes

let me know what you think in the comments <3

Prima Quelle Cose Belle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The classroom doors swing shut behind him with the loud creak of ancient, rusty hinges, and Will winces at the sound. He's out of breath, having run nearly half a mile from the gallery all the way to campus to make it on time, and his shirt is sticking to his back with sweat.

Thankfully his professor doesn't comment on his tardiness, merely raising a brow at him as he continues talking, nor do any of his classmates stare outright as he slips inside and finds a seat near the back of the room. Glancing at the board where his professor is scrawling out pointers in chalk he reaches down into his bag to grab his books, pulling one out—and then he pauses, confusion drawing his brows together as he beholds it.

It's an anatomy book, one he doesn't recognize. It's thick and heavy, bound in rich burgundy leather with its Latin title embossed in gleaming gold filigree. He flips through it, bewildered; he's never even seen this book before, much less kept it in his bag.

Frowning, he yanks the bag up from where he'd dropped it by his chair and roots through its contents, fingers catching on pencils and scalpels and poetry books, none of which belong to him. He registers their unfamiliarity with a sort of dawning realization and horror, drawing his hand back and finally getting a good look at the bag itself.

It isn't his. None of this stuff is his, and the last time he knew he'd had his bag was when he'd taken it to the gallery. Which means—

"I want to see all your finished reports first thing next class," Professor Crawford calls, his deep voice raised and carrying clearly through the cavernous lecture hall as the clock outside chimes the hour, signaling the end of the class. "Twenty-six files on my desk, no exceptions—yes, that includes you, Zeller—and tardy submissions get an automatic downgrade."

A tide of low mutters sweeps through the hall, chairs scraping back and books being closed as everyone starts to pack up. Some students jog out the door to make it to their next lecture as those with a free hour linger, taking their time and turning to talk to their friends. Will tucks the anatomy book back into the bag with a sigh, flipping the leather flap closed and hearing the fastening lock into place with a soft *click*.

"Will," Crawford calls as he makes to slouch out of the hall, "stay back please, I'd like a word with you."

He approaches the professor's desk at the front of the class warily, hands clutching at the unfamiliar weight of the bag slung over his shoulder as the room slowly empties. Professor Crawford is shuffling the papers scattered across the table, gathering them into a haphazard pile before dumping them unceremoniously into his bag.

The door falls shut behind the last student, leaving just the two of them inside the hall. Will fidgets with the clasp on the bag's strap, nervous. "Professor, if this is about me being late today, it was—"

"It's not about that." He waves a dismissive hand. "It doesn't concern me when you decide to show up to my class. No, I want to ask you about the photos that you took off my desk this morning. I'd like them back, if you'd be so kind as to return them to me."

Will feels heat rush into his face. "I—what?"

"Will." Crawford heaves a long-suffering sigh. "I know you have them, and I know where you ran to class from today and what you were doing there, which is why you were late."

He raises a cool brow at Will's likely stupefied expression, crossing his arms. "There's a reason I get asked to consult with law enforcement, Will, and I don't teach criminal psychology for nothing. It'll take much more than a kid like you to get the drop on me, no matter how discreet you think you're being."

He's never been one to stand on ceremony, Jack Crawford; Will has never known him to be anything other than honest and to-the-point, sometimes harshly so. He's kind in his own way, and while his teaching methods are best described as "unorthodox", he's always made it abundantly clear that everything he does is for his students' benefit and never his own. He's probably Will's favorite teacher he's ever had.

He holds an expectant hand out and Will sighs, digging the now-damp and thoroughly crumpled newspaper from his pocket and drawing out the photos he's stashed inside. He hands them over, scuffing a shoe against the rough stone floor of the classroom sullenly.

"I didn't think you'd noticed," he mumbles, and Crawford grins at him, tucking the photos into his pocket. "I know," he says. "I let you take them. In fact, I wanted you to."

Will blinks, taken aback. "You did? Why?"

"Because I know you have an imagination like no one else I've ever encountered," Crawford says. "You can get into the head of any killer, even someone like Il Mostro di Firenze. You can… reconstruct their thinking, empathize with them, understand them. And I very much want to understand Il Mostro."

"You want to catch him."

"Yes." Crawford leans forward. "And I want your help to do it."

Will stares at him. "Are you kidding, Professor?"

"No, Will, I am not." He's looking intently at Will, his gaze unwavering. "I believe that with your help, we can catch this killer. Or at the very least get close enough to predict him. There's a pattern to his kills, there has to be. We just haven't found it yet."

"So…" He sounds hesitant, uncertain to his own ears. "You want to—"

“I want to borrow your imagination, Will.” There’s an almost hungry gleam in his eye, and something about it makes Will distinctly uncomfortable. “And I want you to get into the Monster’s head.”

“When I get into a killer’s head, it’s not a one-way street,” Will says. “I always, always bring something back with me when I go into dark places, and if I let Il Mostro into my head, if I get too close—”

“I won’t let you get too close,” Professor Crawford says, and though it sounds like a promise, it doesn’t feel like one. “And I won’t put you out there where your life will be at risk—you’re still just a student, and you have no training to be in the field. I just want you to help consult on crime scenes. You’ll be saving lives, Will.”

Will thinks of the young man he had met beneath *Primavera*, his soft voice telling him, *I fear sight so acute is more often than not a blessing rather than a curse.* He wonders if he’ll still be sitting there, sketching Chloris and Zephyrus with all of that intense, ruthless focus of his.

“I…” Will swallows past the sudden dryness in his throat. “I’ll think about it, Professor.”

“Good.” Crawford draws back, slinging his bag over his shoulder and moving towards the doors. “And just ‘Jack’ is fine, since we’re going to be working together outside the university from now on. Have a good day, Will.”

And just like that he’s gone, the door clanging shut behind him and leaving Will alone in the classroom, still standing by the desk and clutching the bag that doesn’t belong to him. He stares at the place where Professor Crawford—*Jack*—had been just moments before, left with the distinct feeling that despite the fact that he had been asked for his help, when it comes to allowing Il Mostro into his head, he will never really be given a choice at all.

As he does every single day and as he has been doing for the last three years, Will walks home alone.

The route he takes is long and winding but he loves it, loves the nooks and labyrinthine streets and cobblestone alleyways he walks through to get there. He always manages to discover something new every time; a bit of graffiti, a carving of an angel in a niche tucked into an alley wall, one cobblestone that's a different color than all the others.

He had fallen deeply in love with Florence almost immediately, something he hadn't been anticipating. There's a quiet sense of history imbued into the very essence of the city, hanging in the air and filling his lungs when he breathes it in. A heady farrago of past and present that he had been irresistibly drawn to.

Home is a tiny apartment a few miles from the university, on a cramped side street right off the Via dei Calzaiuoli. The main road is always crowded and never quiet and he has to weave through droves of tourists every day to get there, but the moment he makes the sharp turn onto his little street it's like he's stepped into some whole other world.

It's calm and still, like the mirrored surface of a lake untouched by the teasing fingers of the wind. It's a waiting sort of stillness, as if the whole place is holding its breath in anticipation of something. It's so narrow that if he stands in the center and holds his arms out his fingertips would brush the bricks of the houses bracketing either side of him, and even then the residents have parked their cherry-red and banana-yellow Vespas along the nonexistent curbs.

Fishing his keys out of his pockets he steps up to his building, a squat little cube a hundred or so yards away from the mouth of the street. Jamming the keys into the rusting knob in the center of the door he twists hard and it pops open, and he has to kick it shut behind him with a heel to make sure it doesn't stick.

The door on the ground floor opens as he makes his way towards the stairs and a familiar silver-gray head insinuates between the opening, his wrinkled face breaking out into a wide smile when he sees Will. It transforms his entire countenance, makes him look scores younger than his eighty years.

"Guglielmo," he says happily, opening the door wider and stepping into the entryway and holding a hand out. "I was waiting for you. You're late today."

"I needed to go somewhere after class," Will says, stepping forward to clasp his weathered hand. Three years in Florence have made him more or less fluent in Italian, though he still stumbles here and there sometimes. "The Uffizi Gallery."

"You go there so often you must have all the paintings and statues in your memory by now," he tuts. "Why did you go just now?"

"I left my bag there," he says. "I accidentally took someone else's, a man I met there." He holds the young man's bag up. "He wasn't there, and neither was my bag. He must have it."

"You would forget your head if it weren't attached to your skinny shoulders, Guglielmo."

"I know," Will says with a rueful smile, withdrawing back towards the steps. "I'll come down to fix your boiler after dinner, Emiliano, so leave the door open."

“I always do,” Emiliano says with another toothy smile, and Will gives him a final wave before he begins the long, rickety ascent to the first floor.

He drops the bag by the door with a sigh once he makes his way into his apartment, scrubbing his hands across his face. It’s a tiny space, everything a stone’s throw from the front door; it’s cramped and barely big enough to accommodate him—to say nothing of the bathroom—but he’s come to appreciate the place, even grow fond of it.

His family had never been wealthy. Even back in Louisiana his dad’s house had been a modest place, a converted fishing shack built half on-top of the stream. It had been a castle to him when he was a kid, beautiful and grand, the safest place in the world. He had loved his life there, the life he’d shared with his dad. It had been a life of re-hemmed jeans and pop-tarts for dinner, walking or taking the bus everywhere and making monthly trips to the thrift store downtown.

It had been normal to him; every stitch on his jeans made them feel brand new, and as far as he was concerned he was the luckiest kid in the world to eat dessert for dinner. Walking meant he could hold his dad’s hand and jump in puddles that had gathered near gutters by the curb, and the trip downtown always felt like an adventure. He’d loved getting lost among the endless racks in the thrift store, pretending he was Theseus in the Labyrinth slaying the Minotaur with broken clothes hangers. He hadn’t realized when he was a kid, that they were poor.

It had grown obvious enough as he got older, but he never minded it. It was only after his dad died in Will’s final year of high school that he realized how difficult things were going to get. Deciding there was nothing left for him at home anymore, the first thing he had decided to do after he graduated was leave the country.

The money he’d managed to scrape together using everything he had in the bank, the few hundred dollars he had been bequeathed in his dad’s will and the scant few thousand he’d gotten when he sold the house and most of their possessions had barely been enough to buy a plane ticket and get himself to Italy. The university had been impressed enough with what he’d shown them that they’d given him a generous scholarship, but even that had hardly been enough.

He had scraped by, for the first year or so after he got here. He waited tables and mopped floors, bagged groceries and scrubbed dishes. He worked long shifts for almost no pay, sometimes juggling two or three jobs at once on top of classes and studying. He got creative with where he managed to find places to sleep; people’s couches, public libraries, park benches. Then he’d met Emiliano.

Will toes his shoes off and sprawls out on his bed, feeling the springs creak and squeal in protest as they take his weight, the mattress caving alarmingly beneath him. He rolls over onto his back, staring contemplatively at the cracked ceiling above his head. He wishes he had his books.

He’d been almost surprised by the rush of disappointment that had swept over him when he’d returned to the room that housed the *Primavera* and found it empty, the bench sitting before the painting tauntingly bare and bereft of a lean, blue-suited figure perched on its edge.

Disappointment not because he hadn't found his bag, but rather because he hadn't found who had it.

He tells himself it's silly, that it's a sign of how desperately lonely he is. He's been in Florence for three years, but the only person he can truly call a friend is Emiliano. Just because he had met someone who thought a little like he did and had exchanged a few brief words with him doesn't mean he gets to be crestfallen when he doesn't see him again.

Rolling out of bed he grabs the book off the top of the stack by his desk and a pencil, shouldering the curtains open to sit on the balcony. It's one of his favorite things to do, to just sit cross-legged with a book in his lap and watch the sun go down, watch it sink behind the steeples and slanting shingled roofs of Florence and disappear in a polychromatic explosion of rose and azure and blood orange.

At half past seven he heads downstairs for dinner with Emiliano, his toolbox tucked under his arm. They have a comfortable arrangement, the two of them; Will will tinker away at whichever of Emiliano's appliances are broken—which they are, frequently—and Emiliano will make dinner and occasionally teach him how to cook. He has several of Emiliano's pasta recipes under his belt already, along with one for ribollita that he makes far more often than he's willing to admit.

Every single time Will comes downstairs for dinner he offers to pay rent, and every single time Emiliano refuses. "Tell me, did you pay rent to your father when you lived with him in America?" he would ask, and Will would shake his head, and that would be that.

"Ravioli today," Emiliano calls from the kitchen as Will sets his toolbox down and hunches in front of his ancient boiler. "With goat cheese and pork."

"Sounds and smells delicious," he calls back absently, fumbling out his screwdriver and wrench. He makes quick work of the boiler, and once it stops making a menacing and vaguely threatening sound when he turns it on he stands, wiping the sweat that had beaded on his forehead.

"Done," he says, stepping into the kitchen. "It should be working fine now."

"God will keep you safe," Emiliano says, poking at the contents of the frying pan with a spatula. "You are a good boy, Guglielmo. One day others will see it too, and you will be successful and rich enough to move out of this rathole."

Will laughs, grabbing up a spoon and moving to help him. "Even if I had enough money to buy the whole city I wouldn't move out of this rathole," he says. "I love it here."

"You deserve fine things, Guglielmo," Emiliano murmurs, his head bent over the stove. "Silks and finery. I know you were a beautiful prince in your past life, wandering about your palace of glass and gold."

"I must have been a bad prince, if this is where I've ended up in the life after it," says Will, reaching into the pan to flick a bit of sauce into his mouth. Emiliano bats his hand away. "Cast into poverty, punished for my wicked ways."

“Your time will come,” Emiliano insists, turning to look at him. “You are destined for something great, Guglielmo, I know it.”

“If that’s true then I will be here every day until then, learning to cook from you and fixing your rickety old things,” Will says. “Happy?”

Emiliano smiles. “For now. Now come, let me show you how to stuff the pasta.”

An hour and a belly full of Emiliano’s delicious ravioli later Will gathers his things and bids Emiliano goodnight, making to head back up the stairs to his apartment. A gust of wind blows through the window by the door, lifting the curls of his hair in its frivolous fingers. It smells of nighttime and cigarette smoke and baking bread, and clutched by a sudden fit of whimsy Will sets his toolbox down by the steps and opens the door, stepping out into the chilly night air.

He leaves the building and heads down the street, head down and hands stuffed into his pockets to stave off the chill. The Via dei Calzaiuoli is crowded as it always is, but he makes his way through the throng with a practiced ease, slipping into a back alley. Somewhere distantly a clock strikes nine, the echo of its chime lingering in the air.

Month upon month of being a wanderer drifting through the streets like a ghost had made him intimately familiar with the city, acquainted him with every alley and every nook, every single vein running beneath that leads to the city’s beating heart. He could walk the tangled web of Florence’s streets with his eyes closed.

He finds himself walking around Sant’Ambrogio, wandering down its pretty cobbled lanes with its closing markets filling the air with the cloying smell of old fruit and coffee. Not many shops are open apart from a café here and there, and a tiny little bookstore whose square windows spill warm golden light onto the ground.

Moving towards it, he pushes the door open with his fingertips with a little jingle, exhaling a relieved breath as the warmth inside envelops him like an embrace. It’s larger than it looks from outside, stretching far and deep, every inch of the walls taken up by shelves whose every inch in turn is filled with books.

He walks deeper in, pulling out books at random and glancing through them before placing them back where they had been. He finds everything from fairy tales to science fiction to literary academia, books written in Italian and French and German, English and Spanish and Dutch. Some languages he doesn’t even recognize, their tangled letters scrawled across pages in stark black ink.

He’s squinting to read the title of a particularly thick volume written in Spanish when a sudden voice says, *“El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha.* It’s a particularly fine novel, once you get past its formidable length.”

Will jumps, dropping the book with a loud, resounding thud that sends up a puff of dust. He looks up, heart still hammering, and peering back through a gap between the shelves from the next row is the young man from the Uffizi gallery, his eyebrows rising as Will catches sight of him.

“Jesus,” Will says on an exhale of breath, lifting a hand to rake his hair out of his face. “You scared me.”

“I apologize; that was not my intention,” the man says. He disappears, appearing again a moment later rounding the corner to the shelf where Will is standing. He’s smiling, and there’s a pleased gleam in his eye.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he says, holding a polite hand out. “Two chance encounters in a row.”

“Yeah, it’s a pretty fortuitous coincidence,” Will agrees, reaching out to shake it. His grip is firm but not too firm, his palm smooth and soft against Will’s. Will lets go quickly, feeling warmth that has nothing to do with the lamps above flood his cheeks.

“What brings you to Sant’Ambrogio?” Will asks, kneeling to pick up the book he had dropped. He brushes dust off the cover as he stands, and the young man merely shrugs.

“I was in the area,” is all he says, vaguely. “I enjoy roaming the city at night alone. It proves more effective to clear my head than anything else.”

“Well, that makes two of us.” Will ducks his head, looking back down at the book and worrying at a bit of fraying leather at the corner. “This city is meant to be observed, not just seen.”

“Yes, it is,” the man says softly, looking down the scant inch that separates them in height. Somehow he seems much taller to Will, towering over him in the cramped little space between the shelves. “And those eyes of yours, I imagine, they have observed every inch of it, haven’t they?”

“I’m Will,” Will blurts nervously before he can say anything far stupider, sticking his hand out. “Will Graham. I just realized we never exchanged names.”

“No, we did not.” His eyes crinkle as they look down at Will’s outstretched hand. A moment later he takes it, only this time he doesn’t let go. “Hannibal Lecter.”

“Hannibal,” Will says before he can stop himself, just to taste the sound of it on his tongue. It fits there, he thinks distantly, perched between his teeth. Like it had always belonged in his mouth.

“Will,” Hannibal offers back, and Will thinks he can actually feel his pulse pounding wildly beneath his skin, at his wrist and on his neck. Their hands are still locked in an unmoving handshake, and Hannibal’s nearly swallows Will’s whole. His whole body is hyper-focused on the contact, aware of nothing else.

“We shook hands already,” Hannibal points out as he finally lets go, and Will tries not to feel too forlorn about it. God, he really needs to get out more.

“My dad,” Will says, his throat scratchy. He swallows hard and tries again. “My dad told me I always had to offer someone my hand along with my name. Sorry—it’s an old habit. He

practically drilled it into my head."

"No need to apologize," Hannibal says. "Your father must be a man as courteous as he is wise."

"Yeah," Will says, looking down at his shoes. "Yeah, he was."

"Ah," Hannibal says softly, a quiet noise of both understanding and empathy. "I'm sorry, Will."

"It's—it was a long time ago." He clears his throat. "But thank you."

"It is all the unexpressed love we have for someone that wears the cloak of sadness, disguising itself and coming to our door as an emotion we have commonly dubbed as grief," Hannibal says. "It is a wearisome visitor, but we should be grateful when it comes calling. It tells you that even after all the time that has passed, you still have that love."

Will blinks, taken aback. Who has Hannibal lost, he wonders, to have come to terms with this feeling on his own? "That's… I never thought about it that way," he says finally.

"There are many ways to think about grief, none of which are right or wrong. We all deal with it in our own ways," Hannibal says. "Yours appears to have been coming here, to Florence."

Will laughs a little. "I'm that obvious, huh?"

"I'm afraid so." His eyes crinkle again. "But that is not necessarily a bad thing."

"Why did you come here?" Will asks. "Any particular reason, or…"

"I came here to study medicine," Hannibal says. "Though my eventual goal is to one day be able to study where you came here from, in the United States."

"Oh, yeah?" Will raises his eyebrows. "Where?"

"Johns Hopkins," Hannibal says with a small smile. "I'm aware it's a lofty goal."

"Not for you, I don't think," Will finds himself saying, and Hannibal's smile widens. "That's very kind of you, Will." After a beat of silence he says, "And what do you study?"

"Criminal psychology," Will says, and Hannibal nods as if he had just confirmed some long-held suspicion. "I thought so."

"You did?"

"Your interest in Il Mostro did suggest that you have an interest in the minds of monsters," Hannibal says, and Will cracks a smile. "Yeah, I'm surprised you didn't run as far away from me as you could after our first conversation at the gallery."

“On the contrary,” Hannibal says, and there’s an intensity in his gaze that makes it hard to meet it outright. Will chooses instead to focus on the single lock of chestnut hair that falls artfully over his forehead. “After our first conversation at the gallery I felt nothing but an ardent desire to know you, and be known by you.”

Heat crawls down the back of his neck, spreading downward and out until it feels like his whole body is blushing. “Oh,” is all he manages to get out.

Then, softer, “I wouldn’t mind that.”

Hannibal smiles then, really smiles—and all Will finds himself thinking when he sees it is that it is a predator’s smile, all sharp teeth and savage victory upon flushing its quarry after a long, exacting hunt.

“Thank you, Will,” he says, and Will feels suddenly as if he had made a deal with the devil, his soul wrung out over a bargain with someone who cannot be bargained with. The feeling vanishes as quickly as it had come, and he places the book he’d been holding onto the shelf before turning back to Hannibal.

“I almost forgot,” he says. “I think you might have my bag. I accidentally took yours on my way out of the gallery earlier, I only realized after I got to class.”

“Ah, yes,” Hannibal says, reaching down, and it’s only then that Will realizes that Hannibal had been wearing his bag the whole time. Strange that he hadn’t noticed earlier, he thinks.

Hannibal hands it back to him and he takes it with a sigh of relief. “Thank you. I’ve got your bag back at home, if you’re coming to the gallery again tomorrow—”

“If you don’t live too far from here I could drive us there,” Hannibal says. “I’m parked right outside, and I have an extra helmet.”

Helmet? Will thinks dazedly. “Oh. Well, I suppose that would be…”

“Unless, of course, you’re not comfortable,” Hannibal says, “in which case I would understand completely, and we can arrange to meet some other time—”

“No,” Will says, surprising himself as much as he has Hannibal, if not more so. “No, it’s fine, we can go now. You said you were parked outside?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says, stepping aside and sweeping an arm out. “Just this way.”

“You know,” Will says, “I’d never have taken you for a motorcycle kind of guy.”

Hannibal gives a modest shrug. “We must all have our secrets,” he says, handing Will a helmet and sliding his own over his head. “It would hardly be fair if all my cards were shown at once.”

“Oh, so you’ve got more cards just lying in wait to spring on me at strategically planned intervals?” He slides onto the bike behind Hannibal, and he’s sitting so close he feels it when Hannibal laughs, the sound reverberating through his ribs.

“Of course,” he says, revving the ending with a deafening rumble. “I am a man of many secrets, Will.”

“And I’m a man of patience,” Will says, his mouth suddenly dry. “You know, my dad always warned me about getting onto motorbikes with strange men.”

“And do I meet the requirements to be qualified as a strange man?” Hannibal asks, glancing over his shoulder, and on a sudden, unidentifiable impulse Will leans forward and wraps his arms around Hannibal’s waist, holding onto him.

“You tell me,” he says.

Hannibal pulls away from the curb in response, weaving through the few people milling about the streets and putting on a burst of speed when he hits the main road. The city smears by in a blur of darkness and neon lights, streaks of color that trail through the air like comets. The cold wind tears at his hair and clothes and makes his eyes sting but he keeps them open, wanting to see it all.

He clings tighter to Hannibal’s waist, the warmth of his skin Will can feel even through his jacket keeping the cold at bay. He manages to give him directions to the right street whenever they stop at an intersection, the traffic lights blinking from red to yellow and gilding Hannibal’s face in a halo of golden light.

It takes far too short a while for them to turn into Will's little street, Hannibal expertly navigating his way through the pitiful amount of space he has between Vespas and bicycles and mailboxes making the small space even smaller. When he finally pulls to a stop in front of Will's building they're both thoroughly windswept, and it's with more than a little regret that Will lets go of Hannibal and slides off the bike.

"I'll just go up and get your bag," he says, slightly breathless as he pulls the helmet off and hands it back to Hannibal. "You're welcome to come in out of the cold if you like, but I'll only be a minute."

"Thank you," is all Hannibal says graciously, standing and swinging one long leg off the bike effortlessly as he parks it. He follows Will inside, though he insists on staying in the entryway while Will goes upstairs.

When he jogs back down, properly breathless now and clutching Hannibal's bag Hannibal and Emiliano, who has clearly nosily stuck his head out of his door at the sound of Hannibal's bike, are chatting amicably in Italian as if they'd known each other all their lives and not for about three minutes. He scowls, taking the rest of the steps four at a time and skidding to a stop beside them.

"Here," he says, holding the bag out to Hannibal, who takes it with a smile. "Thank you, Will."

"Isn't it past your bedtime?" Will asks Emiliano waspishly, and gets only an artless smile in reply. "Isn't it past yours?"

He makes a face at him, ushering Hannibal out the door. "Come on," he mutters, and Hannibal turns just as Will starts to close the door. "It was lovely to meet you, sir," he calls out over his shoulder, and the last thing Will sees before the door shuts is Emiliano's delighted grin.

"He's lovely," Hannibal says as they reach the bike, and Will sighs. "Yeah, he is."

"A friend?"

Will nods. "Probably my only friend."

"Well," Hannibal says seriously, looking down at him, "perhaps not your only friend."

It startles a laugh out of him. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, not anymore."

"I'm glad to hear that," Hannibal says, his face softening. "I'll take my leave of you now, Will. It's late, and you must be tired."

"All right," Will says, stepping back as Hannibal slings a leg over the bike and sits. His eyes cling to the strong curve of his thighs, the easy power in his muscles that hide a deceptively powerful strength.

"Thank you, for driving me home," he says as Hannibal slides his helmet on. "You didn't have to."

“I did,” is all Hannibal says with that small smile of his. “And thank you, for an unexpectedly delightful day.”

He feels a smile tug at his lips. “I accidentally took your bag, forgot to tell you my name and made you drive me home at midnight,” he says. “I’d hardly call that delightful.”

“The pleasure of your company is a delight enough,” he says, and Will is glad for the cold, that it hides the stinging warmth clinging to his cheeks.

“If it’s not too forward of me to ask,” Hannibal goes on, “could I request that same pleasure for lunch tomorrow? I know a delightful place by the Arno.”

“I—that—yeah,” Will finally manages to get out. “Thank you, Hannibal.”

He only smiles, and a moment later he’s pulling away, his bike disappearing up the road and turning the corner onto the main street within seconds. Will stares after him for only a moment before turning and making his way back inside, locking the door behind him.

“He’s kind,” Emiliano’s voice says, and a second later he appears in his doorway, still smiling. “Tall. Handsome too, no?”

“Very amusing,” Will says, stooping to pick up his toolbox. “You’re not fooling me, Emiliano.”

“Neither are you,” Emiliano says. “So you are both going for lunch tomorrow?”

“Nosy,” Will calls back over his shoulder, and Emiliano’s laughter follows him up the stairs. “Wear something nice!” he calls after him, and it’s only after he closes his door behind him that Will realizes he’s smiling.

Chapter End Notes

in my romcom era (don't worry it'll turn into a horror story soon)

La Tema Sì Volge in Desio

Chapter Notes

> thank you so much to everyone who's been reading and commenting! i'm really proud of this au so far and it makes me beyond overjoyed that y'all are enjoying it. :D <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The soft scratch of charcoal on paper fills the emptiness of the still air like a flock of birds taking flight in an empty coliseum, the echoes of their beating wings mere sighs that ring endlessly through the air. If he shuts his eyes and lets it become all he hears, it sounds almost like the steady pulse of a disembodied heart.

The gallery is empty what with the oddness of the day and hour, and it is as if all that exists in the world is him, the painting before him and the blank paper beneath his hands, the pencil between his fingers. He rarely knows a peace so absolute as this.

Hannibal had thought, once, that peace was unknowable to him. That it had been one among an innumerable number of things that had been taken from him, prized from his hands and tearing skin where they had been embedded into his flesh. But he had found it—or some semblance of it—here, in the art and the blood of his becoming.

Chloris and Zephyrus have become intimately familiar to him now. He sees them everywhere; in shadows shifting on the ground and in couples walking on the street, in the darkness behind his closed eyelids and in spatters of blood on cobblestones. But they are not all he sees. Not anymore.

He bends his head over his sketchbook, the edge of his pencil nestling snugly into the indent it has pressed into the side of his forefinger with a familiar sweet ache. They blossom across the blank surface, heads tilted towards each other and hands reaching out, adoration and reverence clear in the beckon of their fingers and the look on their faces—faces that are not the same as the ones he sees when he raises his head to look at Botticelli's masterpiece.

Where Chloris has streams of strawberry locks the figure he had sketched has curls of ebony, her soft feminine figure made leaner, broader. He trails a finger along his doleful eyes, thoughtful. For the first time he wishes for something other than charcoal, wishes for pencils the color of seas and skies and storms. A blue so vivid it surpasses comparison, so singular that it can belong only to him and to nothing, no *one* else.

The figure in Zephyrus' place reaches for him with the same beseeching abandon, Icarus reaching with burning fingers for a sun he longs for so yet cannot touch. A sun that is his ultimate undoing, sending him falling like an angel with his wings set aflame down to damnation.

The faint smell of smoke and leather breaks him from his reverie, and he feels his body tense almost against his will as he registers it; he is no longer alone, and the scent is not an unfamiliar one. A moment later the sound of footsteps joins the scratch of his pencil, and someone settles onto the bench beside him.

“You are fond of this painting, aren’t you?” asks a low, rough voice in Italian, and Hannibal turns his head.

It’s the man who had been standing outside the day he had met Will, dark hair shaved close to his skull and crow-faced, broad shoulders and a short, stocky frame. He’s dressed in unseasonably warm clothes, in a thick dark woolen coat and stiff, sturdy trousers. Something about him unsettles Hannibal, makes his hackles rise; his gait, perhaps, or the too-casual hand he has in his pocket.

“I enjoy all of Botticelli’s work,” he says finally. “*Primavera* is no exception. The coming of Spring.”

“And the taking away of Spring as well.” He inclines his head towards the far right of the painting, where Zephyrus reaches with greedy hands to take Chloris for his own. “Her abduction and immortalization.”

“You are fond of this painting as well.” It isn’t a question. “You look at it as though you are searching for some hidden message painted among the nymphs and gods, one you wish to uncover.”

The man doesn’t smile. “Do I?”

“You were here yesterday, and several other days before that as well.”

“So were you,” is all the man says in reply. “It appears this painting and this particular bench before it has seen many meetings such as this.”

“That would imply this to be coincidence,” Hannibal says.

This time the man does smile, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. Something about the look on his face is guarded, closed-off. It makes Hannibal feel as though he’s being vetted, watched under a careful, observant gaze as sharp as a knife—a knife whose edge gleams with something almost like suspicion.

It is then that Hannibal realizes the man has a gun in his pocket.

The innocuous hand he’s slipped into it hasn’t moved since he had sat down, and he can see the faint outline of something large and heavy through the indents in the fabric of his coat. Judging by the close-cropped, almost military style of his hair along with the stiff, careful way he holds himself, a stance that belies years of discipline and training, he supposes it isn’t a shot in the dark to guess that the man is a police officer, or something along the lines of one.

“I have seen you here, sitting before the painting day after day, admiring it,” the man confesses. “And as I frequent this particular gallery as well, I thought it would be impolite to pretend I did not recognize you.”

It was art that first inspired Hannibal, art that first motivated him to create beautiful tableaus of his own, to paint in blood across the canvas of the bodies of those he deemed lesser. He wonders idly as he looks at the man sitting beside him, if it will be art that may ultimately get him caught.

“Why do you come here every day?” he asks. “What do you seek here?”

“Only the truth,” the man says. “A great many truths lie hidden in the brushstrokes of artists long since dead and buried. Their truths mirror our own. If I can see the truth of this painting then I can see the truth I seek.”

“And what truth do you seek?”

The man only smiles again. “When I find it,” he says, “I assure you you will be the first to know.”

Hannibal mulls over the words for a moment in his mind, turning them under and over each other as the threats he knows them to be. He looks down one last time at the beautiful, mournful face of the boy he had sketched, then shuts his sketchbook and stands.

“Then you know where you will find me when you do,” he says, turning away.
“Buongiorno.”

The man doesn’t return the farewell as Hannibal leaves the gallery, looking back just before he turns the corner. He’s turned back towards the painting with his eyes fixed upon Chloris and Zephyrus, his fingers still clenched tight in the pocket of his coat.

Will scowls at his reflection in the mirror, reaching up for what feels like the hundredth time to flatten his hair. There’s a single indefatigably obstinate curl that refuses to stay down,

springing up again the moment he lowers his hand. He exhales a soft string of curses and abandons it, chewing on his lower lip as he gives himself a perfunctory once-over.

There's nothing in his closet that can compare to Hannibal's three-piece suits and leather biking jackets, but he's made do with a relatively clean and wrinkle-free shirt and trousers, two of his less threadbare items of clothing. Lest he look like he's headed to a job interview he had popped the first two buttons of the shirt open, baring the hollows of his throat and collarbone.

He had stood over the sink for a disproportionate amount of time, silently debating with himself whether or not to shave and ultimately deciding against it. It seems too… intimate, to do something as altering to his appearance as shaving. Like the sort of thing he might do for a lover.

The soft, familiar purr of a bike's engine approaching cuts through the haze that clouds his mind, making him turn with a start and a muttered curse. Hannibal is exactly on time, almost eerily so; the clock on the mantle reads half past twelve as he gathers his things, making one last valiant attempt to flatten his hair.

Grabbing his one good coat where it's hanging from a peg on the wall he throws it over his shoulders just in case it rains and fumbles the lock on the front door closed, rapidly descending the stairs and spilling into the entryway just as a polite knock sounds on the building's front door. He throws it open, hoping he doesn't look as disheveled as he feels.

"Good afternoon, Will," Hannibal says, unfailingly courteous as Will has come to know him to be—and just as impeccably dressed, today tastefully so in dove gray and tweed, his hair swept back.

"Hi," Will offers back, and dismisses the heat creeping up the back of his neck as exertion from running down the stairs when Hannibal smiles at him.

"Shall we?" Hannibal asks after a brief pause, gesturing. "I've made reservations."

"I hope it wasn't too much trouble," Will says, shutting the door behind him as he steps forward. "I wouldn't have minded eating anywhere—"

"Not at all," Hannibal says, handing him a helmet. "They make the second best carbonara in Florence."

"Oh?" He slides the helmet on, tugging his coat tighter around his shoulders. "And who makes the first?"

"I do," Hannibal says, turning his head to fling Will an insouciant smile over his shoulder. "Perhaps one day you will let me make it for you."

Will laughs, leaning forward to place a careful hand on Hannibal's shoulder to steady himself. Coming from anyone else it would sound cocksure, arrogant. But Hannibal just sounds earnest and assured in a way that makes it clear that he is abundantly comfortable in his own skin. Will envies him. "Perhaps I will."

The drive to the restaurants feels almost too short; it's a blur of traffic and pedestrians shouting in Italian and cold wind whipping at his cheeks like the blade of a frozen knife, smelling of exhaust and oncoming rain. The restaurant itself is a quaint little place right by the river, with a balcony protruding out the side that hangs directly over the lazily rippling water.

He's unsurprised when a crisply dressed waitress leads them to a table right by the rails, the river flowing gently just below them. She hands them two menus with a smile and vanishes, leaving Will to raise a brow at Hannibal over the menu's wine selection.

"I take it you took the liberty of ordering already?"

Hannibal's smile is a flash of white teeth. "I told you they make the second best carbonara in Florence."

"So you did." He sets the menu down. "I would ask to select the wine, but I don't know much about what goes with what."

"You will come to learn," Hannibal says, placing his own menu aside. "It is a skill that comes with habit and practice, as all skills are."

A waiter appears out of thin air a moment later, placing an expensive-looking bottle of red wine on the table along with a corkscrew before making himself scarce. Will leans back and watches as Hannibal grips the bottle by the neck and expertly twists the cork out with a soft pop, lifting it to his nose and shutting his eyes with a faint sigh before setting it aside and reaching for a glass.

He pours the wine and hands it to Will, who takes it and lifts it to his lips. It's tart, faintly bitter on the back of his tongue when he swallows it, musky and rich. He lowers the glass, eyes clinging to the surety of every movement Hannibal makes, the way he scents the wine before drinking it, the way he swirls it in his mouth before swallowing.

He raises a brow at Will. "Verdict?"

"Better than any wine I've ever had." He smiles, placing his glass down. "I'm impossibly unacquainted with the finer things, vintages included. Emiliano makes his own wine sometimes, but the grapes are hardly this good."

Wine is a luxury, something he considers himself lucky to get a single glass of in a year. If he wants a drink he usually makes do with cheap liquor store whiskey or vodka, though he imagines if he tells Hannibal this he would probably be appropriately horrified.

Their food arrives a few short minutes later, the buttery scent of the pasta wafting through the air and making his mouth water. It's been a long time since he's had good restaurant food, though he's never missed it; Emiliano's food is better than anything he can get in a fancy hotel.

The carbonara tastes just as good as it smells, melting in his mouth and leaving behind a rich, mellow aftertaste. He sets his fork down when Hannibal glances at him expectantly, then

says, “I agree; it’s the second best I’ve had.”

Hannibal’s smile widens. “And the first?”

“Emiliano’s,” he says, and Hannibal laughs. “Well, we will have to see where mine falls in the ranking once you’ve tried it.”

“We will.” He picks up his glass of wine. “When did you start cooking?”

“Just a few years ago,” Hannibal says. “Paris and Florence have been my muses in the kitchen for as long as I can remember.”

“You lived in Paris?”

“I went to school there.” Hannibal takes another sip of wine. “I lived there with my aunt and uncle until I… decided my interests lay elsewhere. But I came to love the city in my time there.”

“And then you came here, to Florence? Why?”

“It is a beautiful city,” Hannibal says. “Rich with culture and rife with diversity. I felt drawn to its layers of complexity, its hidden alleys and marble fountains.”

Time turns to honey as they talk, sticky and slow and sweet. Their pasta grows cold between bites that are taken few and far between, though the wine vanishes quicker. They talk about college, about what they’re studying and why they study it, about the music they like and the operas they hate. Will laughs more than he has since his dad died, and tells Hannibal that he’s spoken more to him today than he has to anyone in years.

“Then I have a singular honor, one I will hold most dear,” Hannibal says, smiling and lifting his glass. “I will consider it a fateful occurrence, seeing you that day beneath *Primavera.*”

“It was,” Will agrees, “though it isn’t exactly coincidence if you’d been going there every day anyway. I was bound to turn up someday, because of Il Mostro.”

“Because of Il Mostro?” He looks surprised. “Why?”

“Because I—God, I probably shouldn’t even be telling you this.” He laughs, dragging a hand down his face, and decides to blame the wine for his loose tongue. “My criminal psychology professor, he gets asked to consult with the police on cases. To draw up psychological profiles on killers if they need one. He was contacted about Il Mostro’s latest… display. The one from Impruneta.”

“Chloris and Zephyrus,” Hannibal says.

“Yes. There were photos from the crime scene on his desk one day, clear ones. Police ones. I took them.”

Hannibal raises a brow. “And your professor, he was all right with this?”

“Well, he didn’t exactly… know I took them.” Will gives a sheepish shrug. “I was curious. I wanted to know more than the paltry case facts I read in the papers. I wanted to… I wanted to *see.*”

“See,” Hannibal repeats. “See what? The crime scene?”

“The crime itself. I wanted to see what he had done, why he had done it, *how* he had done it. I wanted to see his design, in all its horrible, beautiful detail. I needed to go to the source of his inspiration to see it.”

“And the photos, they enabled you to do this?”

“In a way.” Will nervously twirls his fork between his fingers. “They helped, but if I can look at a crime scene, all the details and all the intricacies, they… piece themselves together in my head.”

Hannibal shakes his head. “I do not understand.”

Will sighs, setting his fork down. *I may as well say it and get it over with.* “I have an empathy disorder,” he says bluntly. “Too many mirror neurons. I can assume points of view, intimately. No matter who you are or what you’ve done I can see you, feel you, become you. And I have a… a knack, for people like Il Mostro. The monsters, the madmen. The psychopaths and narcissists. I can predict them, because I understand them.”

Hannibal’s expression doesn’t shift, but there’s something almost like understanding in the gentle curve of his mouth as he frowns. “Ah. That may make quite a few things clear now.”

Will looks away, pushing the pasta around his plate but not lifting any to his mouth. His appetite has all but vanished, and he can’t imagine actually eating anything.

“I understand if this makes things complicated, or if you don’t want to be around me anymore,” he says, still looking down at his plate. “People can get—offended, when I mirror their speech patterns or body language, but I don’t walk around in other people’s skins—”

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice is soft. “If you are willing, would you look at me?”

With a great effort Will lifts his head, dragging his gaze up to meet Hannibal’s. There’s no pity there, no sympathy, no discomfort or disgust. There’s nothing there that Will can make out even with his empathy, and as it always does the lack of insight brings with it only a strange sort of familiarity, of stability. In the emptiness looking back at him he feels only peace.

“I do not think you any lesser or any different because of this,” Hannibal says. “What you have—it is rare, and it is something that is entirely your own. To see the world and the people in it the way you do, to take the crushing weight of burdens that are not yours to bear and break and break and break beneath it all yet still live and love the way you do—it is extraordinary, Will.”

Will swallows hard and nods, not trusting himself to speak.

“So that is why you were at the gallery that day,” Hannibal says, casually resuming their conversation as though he hadn’t just thrown Will’s entire world off-axis, everything tumbling haphazard and frictionless in the sudden absence of gravity and leaving him scrambling for purchase. “You were recreating Il Mostro’s fantasies.”

“Yes,” Will says, still reeling, and mechanically twirls his fork in his pasta and sticks it into his mouth just to give himself something to do besides stare at Hannibal with his mouth agape. “I understood him, or at least understood his motives and methods in that moment.”

“And your admiration for his design comes from your empathy, or it is heightened by your empathy.”

Will just nods, his mouth full of carbonara.

Hannibal looks contemplative. “And your professor, I imagine he wants your help to catch Il Mostro once and for all, bring his reign of terror to an end.”

“Basically,” Will says, swallowing. “I’m—this is pretty classified information, and you’re not really supposed to know this, so I—”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Hannibal says with a small smile. “I will tell no one.”

“Okay.” Will ducks his head, lifting his glass of wine to his lips and taking a generous gulp. “Good. I mean—thank you.”

The clock in the square outside has long since chimed four by the time they leave the restaurant, and the two bottles of wine they’d finished between the two of them makes conversation flow easy and laughter flow easier, makes it easier to silence the quiet voice in the back of his mind that keeps reminding him about what Jack had told him, how the responsibility of catching Il Mostro lies, for better or worse, with him.

They walk aimlessly through pretty, narrow lanes and crowded side streets, still talking as they turn into a row of emptier alleyways that leads into the next like a line of dominoes. Even these narrow roads are lovely, with buttery brick walls covered in splashes of graffiti and wrought iron swirls hammered into the stone.

They’ve just turned the corner into another row of alleys when Will pauses, his steps faltering. He can hear something ahead, faint but unmistakable, something that sounds like a soft cry. He looks ahead into the alley, but all he can see are shadows.

“Will?” Hannibal turns where he’s a few steps ahead, the cold wind tousling his hair. “What’s wrong?”

“I thought I heard something,” he says, falling back into step beside him. “It’s probably nothing.”

“These lanes are usually empty,” Hannibal says, turning to look back at the mouth of the alley. “Perhaps it was a mere trick of the wind.”

“Maybe.” But the disquiet that had begun as a quiet ember has fanned into a sizable blaze by the time they reach the end of the row; the sounds of their footsteps and voices are suddenly too loud, layered under and over each other in a near-deafening crescendo.

A low thud echoes through the alley and he hears a voice, lowered to a sinister growl that makes his skin crawl. There’s another, softer sound, something that sounds almost like a whimper—

“Wait.” Will comes to an abrupt halt in the middle of the alley and sweeps an arm out. His heart is pounding, his mouth going dry. “There’s something going on up ahead. Someone—”

A deafening crack rings out followed by an unmistakably canine whine of pain, making his voice cram up in his throat, the words choking off into a thin gasp. He breaks into a run, ignoring Hannibal calling his name and turning into the next row of narrow alleyways just in time to see the lean, spindly shadow of a man on the wall, his arm raised and a stick in his hand.

Without thinking Will lurches forward, no other thought in his mind but to stop him, to help the dog that’s cowering against the wall with blood staining its pelt, whining low and defeated in its throat. He stumbles between them, realizing too late that the man’s hand is already coming down in a cruel, brutal arc, with the stick still in it.

Squeezing his eyes shut and throwing a hand up over his face to take the brunt of it he turns away, bracing himself—but the blow never lands.

He opens his eyes, gasping in lungfuls of acrid air as something yanks the man away with a sharp jerk, catching his arm and pulling him back. The man turns away from the dog angrily, and with the immediate threat quelled Will feels his knees give out, sending him sliding to the ground in a heap beside it.

The man is yelling, garbled words in Italian that blur in Will’s head like a careless finger running the length of a piano’s keys to make a single, discordant sound. He hears him snarl something about how the dog is his and he can treat it how he wants, demanding to know what the hell their problem is—but Will is deaf to all of it, his blood rushing in his ears in a soundless roar.

“You’re okay,” he whispers, reaching out, and the dog snaps at him weakly, its eyes wide and scared. It moves to take a step back, one of its hind legs buckling beneath it.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” He holds out both his hands, hunching his shoulders. “You’re okay, you’re safe now.”

The dog whimpers and he feels something in his chest twist like a white-hot blade between his ribs, tears gathering in his eyes. *God, it’s the bird and the pickup truck, the goddamn bird and the pickup truck all over again, when will you* learn—

“Let me,” he says beseechingly, and the dog finally shuffles forward with a soft, low sound, bowing its head and nosing one of his hands curiously. He chokes out a breath and then his

hands are sinking into its reddish-brown pelt, pulling it against him and feeling it lean against him, taking its weight.

He can still hear the man shouting but now there's another voice, a lower, softer voice that is quiet and even and utterly, undeniably dangerous. Will feels the hairs on the back of his neck rise, the way they rise whenever he's standing outside in the rain and the air charges just before an explosion of lightning cracks down from the seething sky, cleaving it in two in a blinding flash.

Hannibal.

Through vision made blurry and indistinct with tears he raises his head, shaking hands still gripping the dog's fur. The man's voice rises an octave, a tinge of something almost like fear lending an edge to his words as he shouts. A moment later he tosses the stick he had been gripping, holding his hands up placatingly.

Hannibal takes a step forward, and even though all he can see are smudges and shadows Will can feel the sheer *presence* of him suffusing the air, a menacing, hostile presence that makes a shiver slide cold and slow down his spine. He seems suddenly to take up all the space in the alleyway, every inch of the air laden with some dark, terrifying aura that radiates from that single step Hannibal had taken.

The man turns and runs, his footsteps echoing and fading like heartbeats ringing from the walls before they fade, leaving a piercing silence in their wake. Both Will and the dog are shivering, and as if from a great distance Will registers blearily that it's started to rain.

Hannibal crouches next to Will a moment later, wordlessly reaching out and beginning methodically to check the dog for injuries, running his hands along its flank and placing a hand beneath its snout to check its eyes, carefully examining its awkwardly hanging hind leg. His hands are surprisingly gentle, his touch careful and softer than Will imagined he was capable of.

"What—" Will's voice is cracked, scraped raw. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not a veterinarian, but I am studying to be a surgeon," Hannibal says, his voice still even and calm. His eyes are trained downward, every bit of his considerable focus directed solely upon the dog and its injuries. It's as if nothing else matters, nothing else exists, everything else falling away but for him and what he's doing. "I can only gauge the extent of the damage, but it should be enough until we find someone who has had the adequate training to help."

He slowly lifts the dog's leg and it lets out a small, pained whimper, trying to pull away. Hannibal places a hand on its side to hold it steady, peering downward with a crease appearing between his brows.

The dog whines again and Will reaches out, fingers combing carefully through the thick, matted fur at its neck. "Shh," he says softly, rubbing as gently as he can. "It's okay. You're going to be okay, Winston."

Hannibal doesn't look up, but Will sees one of his brows rise ever so slightly. "Winston?"

Will ducks his head, feeling a flush creep into his cheeks as he continues to rub at his neck. "I just—I thought it suits him."

"It does," Hannibal says quietly, releasing his leg. His hand slides up, ruffling the dog's ears. "What do you think, little one? Do you like it?"

The dog looks up at them, tongue lolling out, and as they watch his tail gives a single, happy wag.

Hannibal looks up then, meeting Will's eyes. He isn't quite smiling, but there's an incandescent warmth in his face that feels a thousand times stronger. "I think he approves," he says. "Winston it is, then."

Will feels a sudden, almost overpowering rush of something almost like affection, tendrils of it unfurling inside him like the first golden rays of dawn after a cold, impossibly dark night. He almost feels like he's choking on it, feeling it bubble up in his throat and cut off his breath.

Hannibal glances back down at Winston, shivering and curled up against Will's chest. "There's no lasting damage, and his injuries are all surface," he says. "His leg looks sprained, but not broken. We should take him to a veterinarian to help with the pain."

Will nods, shucking off his coat and wrapping Winston up in it to stave off his shivers, cocooning him in the sturdy fabric and leaving his leg hanging so as not to disturb it. He tries to pick him up, to carry him, but his hands are shaking too badly. Tremors wrack the length of his fingers, rendering them all but useless as he tries again and again to reach out and pick him up.

He swears under his breath, tears of frustration springing to his eyes. Why does his empathy make him so *weak*—

"Let me, Will," Hannibal says softly, and a moment later he feels something warm and soft wrap around him, enveloping him in much-needed heat. He looks up, startled, as Hannibal carefully drapes his own jacket over Will's shoulders, his hands lingering fractionally on the space between the collar and the wildly fluttering pulse in his throat. The remnants of his body heat clings to the fabric, along with the scent of cologne and rainwater and earthy sweat.

Hannibal gathers Winston in his arms himself and stands, holding him carefully against his chest and seemingly uncaring that his shirt is steadily soaking through and now smells strongly of wet dog. Will pulls Hannibal's jacket tighter around his chest, saying nothing and feeling gratitude like an almost overwhelming tide sweeping over him.

He reaches out and grips the sleeve of Hannibal's shirt, unable to say it but hoping desperately that he understands, that he knows how much this means. Hannibal says nothing, but one of his hands unclenches from where he's holding Winston and comes to rest on top of

Will's, squeezing for a brief moment before he lets go. And with that quiet, tacit recognition hanging in the air between them, they keep their silence.

The drizzle that was hanging in the air like a fine mist has turned to an earnest downpour by the time they leave the alley and make their way through the empty city streets, Hannibal still cradling a now-asleep Winston in his arms as Will walks beside him, arms wrapped around himself and eyes trained on the ground.

Hannibal's jacket is far too big for him, the sleeves dangling comically past his fingers, but even soaked through it's still warm, still as comforting as wearing his dad's jackets used to be. His hair is plastered to his forehead and the back of his neck, and he can still feel the slivers of salty tear tracks dried to sticky trails on his cheeks.

They're walking in silence, not uncomfortable but still stifling. Will wants desperately to break it, to hear Hannibal's voice like an anchor that tethers him to the earth beneath him lest he go entirely unmoored, slipping away into the endless recesses of his own mind.

"When I was six years old," he hears himself say, voice hoarse and quiet but audible, surprising even himself, "I was walking home from school one day and saw a bird on the road."

Hannibal doesn't interrupt him, doesn't stop him, doesn't say anything. He just listens as Will talks and talks and talks, telling him everything about that day—how hot it had been, the sweat he had felt gathering in beads on his forehead and running in rivulets down the back of his neck, hearing the sickening sound of the bird's body being crushed beneath the weight of the truck's tires and its harrowing scream. How it had felt like someone had pierced through him with a hook and dragged the sobs out of him in quick, merciless jerks.

He talks until his voice cracks and the memory feels like it's brimming just underneath his skin, threatening to break through and spill out like blood. His voice is flat and bleak but it all rises up behind his eyes as he says it, as though it had happened yesterday and not decades ago.

“My dad found me hours later,” he says. “He didn’t say anything, didn’t yell at me for staying out so late and scaring him, even though he *was* scared. He just picked me up and took me home. He cleaned me up and wiped my tears and helped me bury the bird in our backyard. There was this little patch of daisies near the very back, secluded and quiet and… pretty. We buried it there.”

He shivers, feeling his throat beginning to close up, but plows on. “He told me that night, that my heart was too big for the world we lived in, greedy and cruel and just waiting to suck out everything good, everything kind. He asked me to promise him that I—that I wouldn’t—”

“Will,” Hannibal says quietly, the first thing he’s said in what feels like hours. “You needn’t tell me if you do not want to.”

“No, I—” Will swallows hard, briefly shutting his eyes. “I want to.”

A few more minutes pass as Will reels in all the emotion that’s scattered around inside him like shrapnel, every piece where it’s embedded into his skin stinging and aching as he pries it out and pieces himself back together. He thinks of the stream behind his dad’s house, thinks of wading in and standing with the rapids rushing around his legs. The calm of it all, the quiet.

“He made me promise,” he says, forcing his voice into some semblance of steadiness, “that I wouldn’t let anything or anyone shrink it, take my gift away and make me like—like everyone else. He told me to hold onto this, and never to let it go.”

He lapses into silence, spent, fresh tears rising to his eyes. He makes no effort to wipe them away; he misses his dad with a sudden, sharp, hollow ache, as if there’s a piece of him that had been carved out when he’d died, one that’s still missing. A wound that had scarred too hasty and too thin, torn open yet again. Still raw, even after all these years.

“You are lucky,” Hannibal says after another long silence, “to have been raised by a man like your father. Someone who taught you that kindness is not a weakness but a strength, and someone who did not punish you for being different but rather bade you cherish it.”

There’s a slight edge to his voice, sharpening the words. A blade turned inward, Will realizes, and remembers that moment in the alleyway when it had seemed as though he had become an entirely different person, quiet and cutting and wholly, unmistakably dangerous. He shivers, and swallows his questions for another day. A kinder day, perhaps.

“We’re here,” Hannibal says, and Will looks up as the squat little building comes into view, a neon sign in the shape of a blue cross blinking above the door. It cuts through the haze of the rain, limning the droplets in bright cyan and making it look as if they’re suspended midmotion in the air.

He stands beside Hannibal silently and lets him set Winston down onto the vet’s table, lets him explain everything to her succinct and concise, not wasting so much as a word. It’s only when the vet asks who the dog belongs to that Will speaks.

“He’s mine,” he says. “He’s my dog.”

He feels Hannibal touch his shoulder gently, but he doesn't say anything. The vet smiles at him, telling him Winston will be all right and he just needs rest and food, then gives him a few quick injections—vaccinations and a light sedative, she says as she expertly withdraws the needle and smooths his fur over.

"He will need to sleep for a day or two, and not put too much pressure on his leg," she says as Winston's eyelids begin to droop. "He should be right as rain in two weeks."

"Thank you," Hannibal says, smiling at her. "Can we take him home now?"

Something about it—it might be the *we* or the *home*—makes a wave of warmth crest over Will despite the rainwater still soaking his clothes and matting his hair. He lets it suffuse him, not stopping it as it fills every inch of him in a heady, intoxicating rush. He wonders if it's belonging, this feeling. *So that's what it feels like.*

This time Will carries Winston back home, sound asleep with his fuzzy head resting on Will's shoulder. He's heavy and his fur is still wet but he doesn't care, feeling the steadiness of his heartbeat against his own. Neither he nor Hannibal speak, but this time the silence between them is anything but stifling.

It takes twenty minutes to reach Will's house, and by time they finally come to a stop outside the door it's dark, though Will doesn't know what time it is. It must be eight or nine in the evening. He's been out for only hours, though somehow it feels like years ago that he stepped outside into the wan afternoon sunlight, worried about his hair not staying down straight and joking with Hannibal about who makes the best carbonara in Florence.

"I'm going to keep him," Will says, looking down at Winston. "I've always wanted a dog. They're—easier to be around than people."

"That they are." Hannibal puts his hands in his pockets, looking up at Will where he stands a step below him. He looks very young, jacketless and with his sleeves rolled up, his hair clinging to his sharp cheekbones in sleek, wet lines. It occurs to Will suddenly that he looks impossibly vulnerable, and impossibly beautiful, and the earth seems to stop spinning for a few moments.

"You two suit each other," Hannibal goes on, glancing at Winston curled up in Will's arms. "He will be happy here with you, and you with him."

He steps forward, placing a careful hand on Winston's head and looking up to smile at Will before he draws away, turning and walking back up the road. He's swallowed within seconds by the shadows and the rain, not even the echo of a footstep lingering in his wake.

Will stares after him for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

the category is fictional men written by women and hannibal lecter is winning (for now)

Natura Sì Malvagia e Ria

Chapter Notes

for the sake of convenience please just assume that everyone is speaking italian except for when hannibal and will are talking, jack and will and talking and when i explicitly state otherwise because there is no way i am translating all that italian.

content warning for gore and violence/injury and some offensive language.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We're here." Jack cuts off the car's engine, steeping the two of them in silence. Will can hear voices and the clicks of camera shutters along with the curious babble of a gathered crowd, muffled and distant beyond the car doors. The cacophony of a crime scene.

Jack turns to him, his face particularly grave. "Will," he says. "I understand that this is the first time you're visiting an active crime scene, and the first time you're seeing death like this."

Will shifts in his seat, vaguely uncomfortable. "I'm pretty familiar with death."

"Not death like this. Not the kind of death Il Mostro stages." He sighs, shutting his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. "What you're about to see, it's going to be… heavy on you. It will definitely disturb you and very likely traumatize you. It isn't too late to back out of this, and if you tell me right now that you want to turn around and go back, I will not try to convince you otherwise. I will drive straight back to the university and we can act like none of this ever happened."

He fixes Will with a hard look. "So, Will, do you want to do this or not?"

Will forces himself to look up, meeting his gaze. "I want to."

There's a finality to it that settles over him once the words leave his mouth, a deal signed and sealed in blood. He had felt the inevitability of it the moment Jack had ushered him into his office an hour ago, his expression grim enough that Will had known what he was going to say before he even opened his mouth.

They step out into the tremulous sunlight, and almost immediately it all comes rushing around him like a reservoir freed from the dam that had held it back; the incessant noise and the garish colors, bright orange tape and stark white canvas hiding the body, the flash of cameras and the smell of sweat and blood and cloying death.

It's too much, overloading his senses; he thinks he can actually feel it all crawling in his skull like a swarm of wasps, buzzing and scratching at the insides of his brain. He fights the

impulse to squeeze his eyes shut and reach up to cover his ears, sink to the floor and quell the noise, do something, *anything*, to soften the jagged edges of it that scrape against his consciousness—but he forces it down, knowing he can't show weakness now.

Instead he shoves his hands into his pockets and clenches his fingers into fists, hard enough for his nails to score raw red half-moons into his palms that he knows will bruise come the evening. The sting helps anchor him, bringing him sharply and abruptly back to reality.

"Ready?" Jack asks as they approach the white canvas, holding his temporary badge up to the two officers flanking it. Will can see a vague shape beyond it, a smudged outline. Tightening his fists, he nods.

The body is positioned against a wall, propped into a kneeling position with nails driven into the shoulders and elbows to keep it upright. Blood has dried in dripping trails of dark red, smears of it on the walls and the ground beneath, stark and bright against the victim's skin. There's—something clutched in his hands, something covered in slick and viscous gore, still sticky even after what must be hours.

Will recognizes it immediately, the kneeling body with eyes forced open wide, clutching a bloody, festering shape up to a mouth that's gaping open to devour it. Something about the victim's face seems vaguely familiar to him, but the more he chases the association the more slippery it becomes, vanishing into the back of his mind.

Jack's face is closed off, set in harsh, forbidding lines as his eyes flick over the body, taking in every gruesome detail. "Whoever chose Il Mostro's name chose it well," is all he murmurs, then turns to Will.

"Ready, Will?"

Swallowing hard, Will nods.

He steps away and Will hears him talking to the officers in a low voice, not quite explaining but making it clear that Will needs time and space to do what he needs to do. He sees them in his periphery, staring at him, turning to each other to mutter and scowl. He feels his throat close up, wishing he could block out their open hostility.

"Why can't we stay here?" one of them asks Jack. "Watch him do his little trick?"

"He's not a circus animal," Jack snaps back. "Either you respect his privacy and his skill or you go back to the station. It's not a choice, officer."

"He's just a kid," the officer protests, and he sounds almost petulant. "You think he can do our jobs better than us?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Jack says. "And he's not just a kid. He's here on my authority, and he's our best shot at catching this madman. Now back off. Clear the area."

The officers mutter and shoot him dirty looks but don't test him further, slouching out from behind the canvas, their heads already bent together in low conversation. One of them

brushes past Will, his shoulder connecting with Will's hard enough to make him stumble. *"Freak,"* he says in a low voice as he passes, the canvas swishing shut behind his retreating back.

Will turns back towards the body, determined not to let any of it unsettle him. Nobody has ever had a different reaction to his empathy; it's easier to see him like they do, like some exotic oddity they can poke at and treat like an animal in a cage. He can't count the number of times people have called him names like that, defensive and prickly as they get in the face of the prospect of being seen.

"Everyone is going to step away for a few minutes," Jack says once the space around the body has emptied, his voice soft. "You take your time. When you're ready to talk, you talk. If you don't feel like it, you don't talk. I'll be outside; you let me know when you're ready for us to come back in."

Will just nods, still staring at the body.

The moment he's gone Will lets out a shuddering breath, allowing his discomfort and the cops' snide words to fall away, the image of the body before him seeping into his mind. It saturates every bit of him until he feels like it's everywhere, in his head and under his skin, filling his lungs when he takes a deep breath.

Unclenching his hands, he closes his eyes and lets the Monster's consciousness envelop his own.

Slowly, the pendulum swings backward—once, twice, thrice—and his eyes open.

The man is cowering against the wall, eyes wide in his pale face, hands thrown up over his head as he begs for mercy. There are pleas, cries of remorse and weak, pathetic justifications, but Will is indifferent to them all. He steps forward, reaching out and taking him by the shirtfront to shove him up against the wall, hard. He slides the knife—a clever little blade, slender but no less deadly because of it—from his pocket, flicking it open and plunging it into the man's stomach.

His scream is nothing but a gurgled cry, cut off by the elbow Will drives hard into his throat to silence him. Carefully, methodically, he drags the blade down, spilling his intestines in a glutinous, unspooling mass at his feet. Will lets him go, wiping his blade on his shirtfront as the man slides down the wall, wheezing and clutching fruitlessly at the wound.

He advances again, grasping the man's right arm first. Breaking it is a simple matter of a glance and a calculation—the right angle, the right amount of force. It pops free with a loud *crack*, and the other arm quickly follows. They hang limp and useless at the man's sides, bent at awkward angles. The man goes limp, a twisted marionette whose strings have been cut.

Helpless but to watch and writhe with pain he can do nothing to quell the man gasps in a weak breath as Will kneels and tugs the rest of his bowels out, every movement economical and precise. Reaching into the gaping incision with fingers intimately familiar with the anatomy he slides his hands upward and pulls out the man's stomach.

The man goes boneless, finally unconscious now as Will places his stomach aside, standing. Seeing no reason the man should wake he steps forward and grasps his jaw in both hands, snapping his neck with a single brutal jerk. He crumples with a mundane sort of finality, sliding down the wall in a graceless heap at Will's feet.

He takes one last trophy; the man's liver, making another neat incision in his body and tucking it away along with his intestines. The easel has been set, the canvas before him blank and ready and waiting. Now all that is left to do is paint.

Positioning him is grueling work, forcing nails into his body and driving them into the wall to hold him upright. He shuts his eyes every few moments to remember the painting, the inspiration behind his own performance. Up on one knee and his body hunched over, eyes and mouth wide open in a haunting caricature of a horrified scream with his own stomach clutched in his hands.

"I have taken you and twisted you, positioned and adorned you." He kneels. "A punishment, a comeuppance, a diorama to display your shame to anyone who can see it."

He reaches out with a trembling hand, fingertips ghosting over his careful incisions, the beautiful mutilations he had carved and bent with such meticulous, fastidious intent. "You are an ode and warning, a gift and an offering in equal measure. I have revealed you for what you are; a mere instrument in the revelation of your own indignity, and in my becoming."

He stands and steps back, breathing hard, and surveys the work of art that has come together beneath his hands. "This is my design."

His eyes fly open. Nausea rises up in the back of his throat and he forces it down, lifting a hand to his mouth and biting down hard on his knuckles to stop his lunch from making a reappearance. He feels himself return slowly back to the present, the feelers of Il Mostro's mind unwrapping from around his own.

It feels like breaching the surface of some dark, cold sea, limbs thrashing desperately to keep himself afloat lest he sink beneath the waves where the ghostly remains of a shipwrecked consciousness float like dead bodies, milky eyes wide open and staring through him in death.

He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment before opening them again, trying to regain his composure. He *won't* be sick. He will not give anyone the satisfaction of seeing him weak.

He steps to the edge of the canvas and twitches it aside, catching Jack's eye and giving him a single nod before withdrawing. A moment later they all come streaming through; cops and forensics, doctors and detectives. They surround the body, voices pitched low as they work.

"Will?" Jack's voice is low, soft, as if he were trying to soothe a skittish colt. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." He tugs his jacket tighter around his shoulders. "I'm fine."

"If you need a moment, we can talk about this later," Jack says. "You don't have to—"

“So this is your bloodhound, Crawford,” says a voice in Italian, and both Will and Jack turn in unison to see two men duck beneath the orange tape surrounding the crime scene, both dressed like detectives—suits and trench coats, open to reveal the holsters slung over their chests and around their hips. One of them—not the man who had spoken—is immediately familiar, and Will feels his guard go up automatically in response to the recognition.

“This is Will Graham,” Jack says, his own voice guarded as he puts a brief hand on Will’s shoulder. “He’s a student of mine. Exceptionally bright, and gifted with a particularly vivid imagination.”

“We’ve all heard… things about the boy,” the detective says, looking Will over with barely-contained disdain. “Rumors and innuendo.”

“He’s here to help,” Jack says, and now there’s a slight edge to the words. “I hope there’s no problem, detective.”

“Problem?” He smiles blandly at Jack, ignoring Will completely. “No, there’s no problem. By all means, allow the boy to use his… what is it you say? His *imagination.”*

“Paolo,” the man’s partner mutters, shaking his head. “Leave it.”

“Don’t just let them contaminate the crime scene and do our jobs for us,” Detective Paolo snaps, dropping all pretense and turning to him. “How is what he does any different from what you do, Pazzi? Why do we need a college student to tell us what we already know? The body has been made to look like it’s praying—”

“It’s *Saturn Devouring His Son,”* Will says.

Paolo turns to him, scowling. “What?”

“The body,” Will clarifies. “It’s meant to be the painting *Saturn Devouring His Son* by Francisco de Goya. The kneeling position, the stomach placed in his hands like he’s eating it, the wide eyes. It’s not made to look like it’s praying, it’s made to look like the painting.”

There’s a brief, weighted silence.

“Signor Graham,” Detective Pazzi says hastily, stepping forward and sweeping an arm out. “If you do not mind, would you walk with me a moment? I wish to have a word with you.”

Exchanging a quick look with Jack he stuffs his hands into his pockets and follows Pazzi outside, head down against the stiff wind that’s blowing. The square has emptied somewhat, the crowd thinner than it was when they had arrived. The sun is cloaked in clouds now, and it casts long shadows along the cobbles as they walk.

“I apologize for the behavior my partner,” Pazzi says after a few minutes’ tense silence in halting, heavily accented English. “He does not believe the police need to consult with any outside sources to solve their cases, even though we most certainly need your help.”

“He said you… do what I do,” Will says. “You recreate crimes?”

“Perhaps not as accurately as you, but yes,” Pazzi says. “Like you, I was born with the unfortunate gift of imagination. I became a police officer so it would be used for good. To save people.”

“You were at the gallery that day,” Will says. “Outside the room where *Primavera* is.”

“I was,” Pazzi says. “I am there most days, whenever I have time. So is the young Lithuanian man we both met there.”

It takes a moment for Will to realize he means Hannibal. “So?”

“You know,” Pazzi says, “psychopaths are narcissists. They love to follow their own crimes, read about them, see what people are saying and thinking. They often revisit places associated with their crimes, like funerals and crime scenes, and in some cases the places where they got their inspiration.”

The words sting, even though they’re not barbs aimed at him. “Whatever you’re implying, you’re wrong,” he says, and his voice is frosty, uninviting. “You don’t even know him.”

“And you do?” His voice isn’t unkind, but there’s a sort of ruthlessness beneath the words. “You met him a week ago, no?”

“I know him enough to know he’s not who you’re looking for,” Will says. “You don’t even have any evidence.”

“But there is evidence, isn’t there?” Now there’s an almost fanatic gleam in his eyes, in his voice. He’s *desperate*, Will realizes suddenly, desperate to catch Il Mostro. He wants to be known for this case, wants it to be his—no matter what or who he destroys to get it. “He takes organs. Cuts them from his victims’ bodies with surgical precision. What does he do with them?”

“I—” Will shakes his head. “Serial killers take trophies from their victims. It’s not uncommon.”

“No, he does something with them, I am sure of it,” Pazzi says. “Just taking them is not enough for Il Mostro.”

“Whatever he does with them, it has nothing to do with Hannibal,” Will says. “Just because you want someone to pin this on doesn’t mean you get to pin it on him.” They’ve stopped walking, the crime scene a distant echo down the street. Pazzi is looking at him long and hard, his face unreadable.

“Perhaps there is no connection, no evidence,” he says finally. “But know that when I tell you to be wary of your Hannibal, I say it because he is not what you think he is. I do not wish for our next meeting to be at a crime scene like this with you in the victim’s place.”

He tips his hat to Will and turns, walking back the way they came. Will watches him go, hands still in his pockets, until Pazzi ducks around the white canvas surrounding the body and disappears from view.

Knowing Jack will understand and not begrudge him his sudden absence Will leaves the crime scene behind, weaving through crowds that thicken as afternoon begins to wane into evening. He glances at his watch—he's missed most of his classes today, and the mere thought of catching up on all the extra work makes him determined not to head back home or to campus just yet.

He gets on a bus and heads instead for the gallery, Pazzi's warning echoing in his mind as he leans his temple against the dirty glass of the window beside him and watches the city smear by outside. Unwelcome thoughts creep in in their wake, curling slow and sinuous in his mind the longer he lingers on them.

It had been a week since he had last seen Hannibal, and every time Will had thought about finding him to thank him and pay him back for the trip to the vet, he was reminded of the fact that he had no idea where Hannibal lived or where he studied. He hadn't even known before speaking to Pazzi today that he was from Lithuania.

He ignores the twist of unease in his gut, standing as the bus slows in front of the gallery and stepping out into the chilly air. He heads inside quickly to get out of the cold, almost welcoming the stifling humidity of the crowd that surrounds him, the checkered marble halls filled with tourists and locals alike. They move slowly, milling in front of the paintings and statues and murals, making it easier for him to make his way around them.

It feels as though there's a tether attached to him, pulling him relentlessly towards his destination almost as if something is drawing him there. He's almost running by the time he reaches the right corridor, putting on a burst of speed just as he careens around the corner and bursts into the familiar gallery.

His breath catches in his throat; the room is full of people, and while the crowd partially obscures his view of the painting hanging on the far wall he can see the bench before it clearly enough—and the slender figure sitting upon it, head canted over the sketchbook Will knows rests in his lap.

He hesitates though even he isn't quite sure why, lingering unsure in the doorway. A moment later the figure goes still and raises his head, turning ever so slightly—and suddenly somehow, but *how* Will has no idea—he knows with an unequivocal sort of certainty that Hannibal knows he's there.

It's as if the crowd suddenly vanishes behind a misted windowpane, turning into blurred outlines, the babble of their voices turning to a muted murmur in the background. In this one fleeting second it's as if nothing else exists now but the two of them, with Will hanging in the doorway and Hannibal turned towards him, waiting.

Slowly he approaches, almost holding his breath as he makes his way around the bench. Hannibal looks up at him, the look on his face unreadable as Will comes to a stop beside him, still standing. For a few moments they simply look at each other, saying nothing. Then Will lowers himself carefully onto the bench beside him, folding his hands in his lap.

They sit in companionable silence awhile, both looking at the painting. It's resplendent in the golden light suffusing the room, benevolent and lovely as the gods and nymphs it depicts. The crowd ebbs and flows around them, shifting like tides on the beach lapping gently at his ankles, soothing in its erratic predictability.

"I never thanked you," Will says finally as the room empties, only a few stragglers left from the crowd. They linger like specters, floating serene and transient in his periphery. "For—everything you did that day."

"I did only what I knew to be right, and that which a friend would do," comes the soft reply. "You do not need to thank me, Will."

"I do." He still doesn't turn his head. "You paid for the vet when I should have. At least let me pay you back."

"No," Hannibal says firmly. "You saved and rescued Winston, Will. The brunt of what happened rested upon you. The least I could do is to cover any costs that would entail."

Will swallows thickly. "But—"

"I'm afraid I must insist, Will," Hannibal says, and though his voice is gentle there's a firm finality to the words that tells Will that any more protests would not be taken in good taste. Will sighs, looking down at his fingers entwined tight in his lap.

"Okay," he says softly. "But—thank you, Hannibal. Really."

He only shakes his head and wordlessly offers Will his sketchbook, open to the page he had been sketching on when Will had walked in. He glances at Hannibal curiously and gets only an expectant look in return, his eyebrow rising. Reaching out slowly, he takes the sketchbook and draws it down into his lap, his eyes falling on the sketch whose arcing lines flow as smooth and graceful as falling angels across the paper.

It's Chloris and Zephyrus as it always is only this time it's *them*, Will and Hannibal in their places, with flowers streaming from Will's mouth and Hannibal's face tilted down towards

him, both with eyes only for each other. It's the most intricate sketch of all his renditions of the nymph and her god, every last detail rendered in careful, reverent strokes of charcoal.

The other figures in the painting are mere shadows, faceless and serving only to make the two of them leap out clearer and brighter. His own face stares back at him, melancholy and forlorn. He sees himself the way Hannibal must see him; fragile and dangerous, and so, so beautiful. And he sees Hannibal the way he sees himself—fallen, in every sense of the word.

He doesn't take his eyes off the sketch, feeling something he can't quite name welling up in his throat, making it hard to breathe.

"Please," he says, his voice so soft even he hardly hears it, "please let me do something for you."

"Allow me to make you dinner tonight," Hannibal says.

He finally looks up, huffing out an incredulous laugh. "What? Hannibal, *I* want to do something for *you*."

"And you will be," Hannibal says archly, a peculiar gleam in his eye. "You will be brightening my home and my dinner table as well as my evening with your company. Nor would an extra pair of hands in the kitchen be unwelcome."

"Well, in that case." He lets out a breath, closing the sketchbook carefully, holding it out and leveling an expectant look at Hannibal. "Lead the way."

Much like he himself is, Hannibal's home is unsparingly elegant and opulently beautiful.

It looks, Will thinks as Hannibal politely ushers him in, about the way he had always imagined it would. Something tells him Hannibal insists only on surrounding himself with lovely things; gilt-edged mirrors and classical paintings, black marble floors shot through with veins of gold and mahogany tables that gleam a rich red-brown in the golden light

spilling down from a gilded chandelier dripping crystals. Where Will fits among all this, he isn't quite sure.

The kitchen is just as magnificent, an affair of rustic wood and brass taps, wide open spaces and gleaming countertops. It's the sort of kitchen where you'd *want* to cook every day. Will thinks sadly back to his own tiny, barely-used kitchenette, a single shelf with a rusting stove that, if he was lucky, sputtered weakly to life every few days.

He's leaning against the wall, a glass of wine in his hand as Hannibal sets an armful of ingredients on the counter one by one, laying them out neatly. He can hear soft, catlike piano music trickling from the open throat of the antique gramophone he had spotted in the corner of the living room. It fills the air with the lilting, romantic chords of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, sweet and sad.

"I'll make you a sweet and savory foie gras served with spiced honey and fresh figs," Hannibal says, turning to him with a beatific smile. "We will make it together."

Which is how fifteen minutes later Will finds himself stationed at one of the counters, an apron tied around his waist as he carefully minces garlic and cuts thin slices of homemade brioche bread, three glasses of wine warming his insides. The delicious smell of melting butter and sizzling meat richens the air along with the faint strains of classical music, and the dizzy, euphoric warmth that Will has come to associate with being around Hannibal is curled up in his chest, nestled comfortably between his ribs.

He's standing by the stove a few feet away from Will, jacket eschewed and with his shirtsleeves rolled up till his elbows. Every few seconds Will glances sideways out of the corner of his eye, catching the occasional flash of deft fingers folding paper-thin sheets of meat, the concentrated furrow of brows, the blood-red flash of his wineglass catching the light and the vulnerable line of his throat moving as he swallows a sip.

There's something about watching someone who doesn't know they're being watched, looking at them steeped in total concentration and absorbed in what they're doing as Hannibal is. He can't bring himself to look away, his eyes clinging to the most fleeting of details and endeavoring to commit them all to memory.

He's just chanced another quick look sideways—and freezes when he sees Hannibal already looking back, their eyes meeting over the counter that separates them.

"I meant to ask you earlier," Hannibal says, setting the knife he had been holding aside. "How is Winston? Has he recovered well?"

"Yeah," Will says. "Yeah, he's doing all right. I have to carry him up and down the stairs since he's still limping a little, but other than that he's doing a lot better."

"I'm glad to hear that," Hannibal says, his lips tilting up into a smile. "And has he adjusted to his new home?"

"More than adjusted," Will says, smiling back. "He and Emiliano are already thick as thieves. Even when I'm home he insists on babysitting, feeding him every bit of meat he can find in

the pantry. I've warned him that he's going to be spoiled if he keeps it up."

"He is surrounded by love, then, as he should be." There's a faintly distant look on Hannibal's face, as if he were suddenly far away. "Why treat a living thing with cruelty when it can be treated with kindness?"

"A question that comes up quite a bit in my field of work," Will mutters; it's half-under his breath, slipping out almost unintentionally.

"I read the papers," Hannibal says, and now he looks slightly concerned. "The Monster has struck again."

"Indeed he has. And I got to look at his strike firsthand this afternoon." He sighs, picking up his glass. "Got to be gawked at like some sort of exotic animal, too. I can't say which was more fun."

There's a sharp bitterness to the words that surprises even him; he supposes one can never really be invulnerable against words that are wielded like weapons, intended to slip past every chink in his armor and pierce him where it hurts.

"I take it the police were less than welcoming," Hannibal says. "They can be astonishingly narrow-minded, averse even, to people who are different. A pity, for they are the ones who are most often targets of the kinds of crimes they are supposed to prevent."

"Yeah, well." Will stabs his knife into an unfortunate tomato, skewering it. "Even my professor couldn't scare them out of treating me like some kind of oddity. It's—" He laughs, and it's a bitter, brittle sound. "It's been happening since I was a kid. Whenever people find out about my… about what I can do, they know I can see them, so they get defensive. And people can be… ugly when they get defensive."

"They strike to hurt," Hannibal says. "To cause pain. To deal instead of be dealt."

Will sighs. "I'm used to it, or at least I thought I was."

"I am not sure one can truly get used to something like that, Will." Hannibal's voice rings out, soft and sad—and right next to him. Will looks up, startled, wondering how he moved around the counter so fast—and suddenly he's looking right into Hannibal's eyes, turned to the color of blood by the light and scant inches away from his own.

Normally, Will would shy away from the eye contact, would drop his gaze or turn away entirely. Normally he would pretend it hadn't happened at all and that it was just an accident, would focus on the tomatoes he was cutting and not look up again.

This time, he does none of those things.

He looks back, bold, curious, *shameless*, letting his gaze lock with Hannibal's and pin him there, a butterfly on a board whose wings flutter feeble and fruitless. He lets himself drown in the blood of Hannibal's eyes, lets it drench him, coat him, taint him.

He wonders if this is what the poets mean when they rhapsodize about getting lost in someone's eyes; Hannibal's become all he can see, and he suddenly doesn't quite know where he is, the rest of the world fading to blurs and background murmurs.

"Will," Hannibal says, "would you dance with me?"

The knife that had been in Will's hand slips and hits the counter beneath it with a clatter. "What?"

Hannibal merely raises an artless brow. "There is music," he points out. "And it will help."

"Do I need help?"

"Who amongst us does not?" He smiles, and then he's reaching down to take Will's hands, tugging him gently out from behind the counter and guiding him into the open space in the center of the kitchen. The corners of his mouth are tilting up almost involuntarily as Hannibal settles a chaste hand on his hip, gently nudging his feet into position.

"I… don't know how to dance," Will admits, placing a careful hand on Hannibal's shoulder.

"I do," Hannibal says. "It's fairly simple. I will guide you."

"I might step on your feet."

"Step away."

"What if I fall?"

"I will catch you, dear Will."

"Well then." He tries to keep his voice steady as their fingers lace together, loose but firm. "It appears you've convinced me."

"Good." He's smiling down at Will, the corners of his eyes crinkling gently. "May I?"

"Please."

The first few shuffles forward and sideways are slightly awkward; there's a stumble here and there, a stray giggle, a scrunch of eyebrows and frequent glances down at his feet. The music swells and then pulls away, coy, only to swell again a moment later like the rapids of a lively stream. It crashes through its given course with the same reckless, energetic abandon, cascading through the air just as unstoppable and uncrossable.

He tries to listen to it, tries to pace himself along its rhythm and time his steps, but he only succeeds in stumbling again, his fingers knotting tight into the fabric of Hannibal's shirt at his shoulder to steady himself.

"Sorry," he mutters, and Hannibal merely shakes his head. "You are thinking too much, Will," he says. "Relax your overactive mind and allow your instincts to guide you."

He has no idea what that's supposed to mean but he tries anyway, caught up against Hannibal and helpless but to be led. The proximity is like a drug, flooding his system and turning him pliant and rapidly losing awareness in its wake; he didn't even know it was possible to be so conscious of another person—the warmth of their hands and the cadence of their breaths and even the way they *smell*, steel and spices and cologne and Hannibal settling warm and heavy in his lungs when he breathes it in.

He reins in his wayward thoughts with a sharp tug, concentrating instead on trying not to trip or step on Hannibal's feet, his lower lip caught on his teeth. Slow, itchy heat crawls up the back of his neck, and he dismisses it as exertion.

Hannibal steps back and spins Will neatly and without warning, making him suck in a startled breath. The movement tucks his back against a broad, solid chest for a split second, their heartbeats aligning for a moment, perfectly in sync, before Hannibal releases him like a coiled spring without missing a beat.

And Will finds himself laughing as he's pulled back into position facing Hannibal, actually laughing, giddy and half-mad with nerves and adrenaline and whatever it is that warm, effervescent feeling is that he always feels whenever Hannibal is around. It's potent and intoxicating and addicting, and he lets it fizz through his veins like champagne, lets consequence recede faraway and untouchable, just this once.

Hannibal draws him close and this time when he stumbles, there's nowhere else to go. They press up against each other, chest to chest, the scant space between them swallowed up by heat and closeness. He can feel Hannibal's ribs against his own, raised bars of a cage shifting together. The wild beating things they cage throw themselves against their confines, aching and longing for contact.

Careful, tentative arms fold around Will's waist, his own automatically reaching up to loop around Hannibal's neck. His eyes fill Will's vision, becoming all he can see, and he's standing so close Will can feel the warmth of every one of his breaths feather out on his mouth.

They've stopped dancing, standing entwined in the kitchen with the soft, melancholy keen of Bach still trickling through the air, a faint, distant echo. The sound of his own breathing is louder, abnormally so in the delicate stillness of this one moment, fragile and brittle as a film of ice clinging to the surface of a lake.

He isn't sure if he leans up or Hannibal leans down or if it's both, but between one heartbeat and the next the dwindling space between their mouths begins to close millimeter by millimeter, achingly slow. He feels his eyes begin to fall shut involuntarily, fingers bunching in the fabric at his back as they breathe the same breath—

Something sizzles loudly on the stove and they both draw away hastily, breaking apart. They're both breathing hard, staring at each other for one second, two, three—and then Hannibal steps back apologetically, turning and moving swiftly to whatever requires his attention on the stove.

Will sags back against the counter behind him, quickly picking up his glass of wine with fingers that shake minutely as he raises it to his lips, taking in a sizeable swallow of the bloodred liquid inside. His heart is hammering, and he forces it back into some semblance of steadiness as he picks up the knife again, lowering his gaze back to the forgotten tomatoes he had been cutting.

Neither of them mention what had happened as they finish cooking and lay the ornate porcelain dishes on the table, and it's as if some mutual understanding had passed between them in its wake. An unspoken agreement not to speak of it.

The foie gras is delicious, delicate and melting on his tongue the moment he puts it in his mouth. The flavors explode on his palate, sweet and sour and spicy and rich. Hannibal's burgundy eyes track every movement of his fork intensely, his little smile widening with every bite that Will takes.

"It's been quite a while since I've been able to cook for—and with—someone," he says, glancing down to cut into his own food. "I had quite forgotten how rewarding a feeling it can be."

"Do you cook most nights?"

"I prepare most meals myself," Hannibal says by way of confirmation. "And I'm very careful about what I put into my body, which is why I insist upon being present when sourcing my meat."

"Really?" He raises a brow. "Seems fastidious."

"Oh, one can never be too careful."

"And did you thoroughly source this particular meal's meat?"

"I did," Hannibal says, inclining his head.

"You know," Will says, spearing a bit of meat on the prongs of his fork and holding it up, "most people look down on this particular dish precisely because of its source."

Hannibal smiles. "I assure you it was a particularly impertinent duck, Will."

He laughs, pulling the meat off the fork with his teeth. "I'm sure."

The rest of the meal passes almost too quickly, time vanishing into the wake of cutlery clinking on the edges of their plates and in the glimmer of red wine, in the sound of their voices; amicable debates about the motives of Mephistopheles and the shortcomings of Faust.

"Can I drive you home?" Hannibal asks once the table is clear and the kitchen is spotless, and Will's pockets are weighed down with homemade seasoned sausage that Hannibal had insisted he take. ("For Winston," he had said firmly, and had refused to hear Will's weak protests.)

"I can take the bus," Will says. "You've already done so much."

“I assure you it’s no trouble.”

“I can manage,” Will says, ducking his head. “Really.”

“Very well, then. Allow me to fetch your coat,” he says, and a few minutes later he finds himself standing on the doorstep, cold night air beginning to seep through his shirt and make him shiver.

“Thank you for tonight,” Will says. “Everything was lovely.”

“The pleasure was mine, Will,” Hannibal says, smiling and holding out his coat. “It is always nice to have a friend for dinner.”

Will turns, allowing Hannibal to draw his coat up his arms and settle the fabric over his shoulders, hands carefully smoothing over a few wrinkles near the collar. He doesn’t protest, malleable as he’s made by the warmth of his fingers he can feel even through the fabric, two weights radiating heat on each of his shoulders, and it coaxes his voice out of him almost against his will.

“I’d like to see you again,” he says, the words coming out soft and quiet. To his surprise, he means them, and feels only an echo of regret once they pass his lips.

“And I you, Will.” He’s gone still, standing behind Will with his hands still on his shoulders. Distantly somewhere in the back of his mind there’s a warning and a memory, blood slicking cobblestones and a cold voice in a dark alleyway, but they slip like water through his fingers when he reaches for them, vanishing with a sigh.

The pressure on his shoulders vanishes and a moment later Hannibal steps in front of him, his face solemn. “Will,” he says, “if it is not unforgivably inappropriate of me, I would ask you something.”

Will swallows hard past his suddenly dry throat. “Okay.”

There’s something almost like hesitation tugging at Hannibal’s handsome face as he raises his eyes to Will’s. “We have only known each other a short while,” he says, “and far be it from me to shatter anything that has grown between us, but I have come to care for you, Will. Far more than I thought possible.”

Unable to think of a single thing to say, Will can only stare at him as he takes in a deep breath.

“You have captivated me, mind, heart, body and soul, like no other ever has,” Hannibal says. “And I know that no other ever will.”

“Hannibal.”

“It is the truth.” He’s looking earnestly back at Will. “However inconceivable.”

He reaches out and takes Will’s hand, threading his fingers through Will’s. “With your permission, Will, I would like to court you.”

He's still gaping at Hannibal, his head full of white noise. Finally after several moments of wrangling his tongue back into coherency the first thing that comes out of his mouth is, "Me?"

Hannibal looks faintly perplexed. "Yes," he says after a brief pause. "Of course, you."

"But…" He shakes his head. "Why?"

"Would that you could see yourself the way I do," Hannibal says softly. "Because from what I have seen you are kind and brave and good, and I think there is a great deal more I have yet to see. And I would like to."

Will stares down at their entwined hands. "Hannibal…"

"I would earn your hand, Will," Hannibal says, "if you will have me."

"I…" He swallows. It isn't much of a choice at all, he thinks, and there's something insurmountably exultant about the realization. "I think I'd like that," he says finally, and looks up at last.

Hannibal beams at him, lifting his hand to his lips and bending his head to press a featherlight kiss to his knuckles. Goosebumps break out over his skin, and he shivers at the contact, chaste though it is. Heat stings his cheeks as Hannibal raises his eyes to Will's again, glittering like garnets in the dark.

"I've got some catching up to do," Will says, mouth suddenly dry. "So far you've taken quite a bit of trouble on my behalf."

"And I must apologize in advance for insisting on taking much more," Hannibal says, letting him go and stepping back. "It's late, and the last bus to the Via dei Calzaiuoli leaves in five minutes. I won't keep you."

I want you to, Will wants to say, but he swallows the words. Maybe some other night, he thinks, and the thought brings a wave of nervous anticipation in its wake.

"Get home safely," Hannibal says, and Will can only nod before drawing back, turning and stumbling up the road towards the bus stop, the cold doing nothing to thaw the warmth that's beginning to spread like molten gold down his entire body.

He shoves his hands into his pockets, putting his head down against the wind and to hide the pathetically soppy smile that keeps threatening to tug at his mouth. His cheeks feel so hot that he raises a hand to his face, fingertips grazing his own skin, and the tingling warmth doesn't dissipate the whole way home.

Chapter End Notes

jack is the mvp and i will tolerate no jack slander in the comments or anywhere else. hating him is a red flag actually.

Dal Fiero Pasto

Chapter Notes

content warning for some homophobic language.

Will isn't entirely sure how long his courtship with Hannibal lasts.

The days start to bleed into each other almost immediately, time turning to sticky and meaningless honey until it all becomes one long smear, sweet and heavy and golden. Memories are tangled in its wake, singular moments caught like dewdrops spangling a spiderweb.

Every single morning a beautiful bouquet of flowers is delivered to his apartment, greeting him with an explosion of color and the sweet scent of gardenias and orchids and tulips when he opens his door. It's a different arrangement every day, each one displayed meticulously without a single bloom out of place.

He never sees the delivery man, nor is there ever any note besides a single crisp ivory card tucked into the blossoms, his name written in a curling, elegant hand on the sweetly perfumed surface. He puts the bouquets on the balcony, and they make his whole apartment smell like spring.

Sometimes there are other gifts; a recipe for Emiliano, a treat for Winston, a letter for Will. They're *love* letters, all of them handwritten and wax-sealed and tucked neatly into blush-colored envelopes. Their contents are hardly what one would call risqué, but he still feels his cheeks warm when he reads them, and he keeps them where he's sure nobody will see them. He's reread them enough times that he's memorized each and every one word for word.

Twice a week, Hannibal invites him to his house for dinner. They both seem to prefer it to going to a restaurant; there's something singular about the intimacy of it all, something careful and quiet. Not everybody is allowed in Hannibal's kitchen.

Some nights they cook together, and others Hannibal hands him a glass of wine and insists he make himself comfortable until the food is served. He's content to sit, to watch Hannibal's hands and his mouth and the play of the muscles in his back he can see even through the fabric of his shirt. To look at him, to see him and think, *He's mine.*

They never touch—not in a particularly intimate way. There are little butterfly glances, hands brief on backs and shoulders in the kitchen, fingers tangling together when they fall into step beside each other as they walk on the street. But there's never anything more than that, and near-overwhelmed as he is, Will is grateful for it.

Every time before they part ways Hannibal takes Will's hand and lifts it to his lips, a sweetly old-fashioned gesture that nevertheless makes blood rush in a searing flood into his face. He always smiles that soft, private smile Will has noticed he reserves solely for him and says, "Until we meet again, dear Will."

He feels helplessly out of his depth in the face of it all, swept away as if by a riptide and into some boundless unknown that he's fighting to stay afloat in. Nobody had ever so much looked at him for years, and now he is the sole focus of the attention of someone like Hannibal, someone whose attention is like fine wine; delectable yet dangerously addicting, deceptively intoxicating. He's halfway drunk already, made lightheaded and malleable.

He has dreams, and he sees Hannibal in all of them.

He's always in his kitchen, sharpening a knife with his apron tied around his waist and a body lying on the counter ready to be skinned and gutted and carved. He smiles at Will as he walks in, and then he holds up a plate with a bloody slab of human meat positioned on the delicate china and says, "Dinner is served."

Sometimes he dreams he is the body on the counter, looking up into Hannibal's face as he carves into Will steady and calm. He places bits of him onto a plate and lifts them to his mouth, closing his eyes after every bite as if to savor the taste of him.

He always wakes with a jerk, sweat slicking his skin and his breaths coming fast and uneven. It takes a moment to discern whether what he had seen were dreams or memories; it's easy, somehow, to picture Hannibal eating him alive. Perhaps a little too easy.

It isn't anything he does or says, isn't the way he looks at Will as though he wants to devour him sometimes—even though he does. It's something about the stark emptiness in his eyes, ever inscrutable and enigmatic even to Will. It's the way he moves, the shape of his thoughts, how he chooses his words like scalpels; knowing exactly which ones to use and when. To slice, to slip past skin and sinew and part his flesh easily, reaching the most vital parts of him.

It comes as no surprise to him, the realization that Hannibal is dangerous. Perhaps he had known it from the moment they had met, the moment he had looked into those fathomless wine-dark eyes and seen only emptiness staring back. But those eyes see him—perhaps better than anyone ever has. And what they have, is it not nothing but ignoring the worst in each other so as to continue enjoying the best?

So he lets Hannibal fuss and dote and indulge, lets him cook Will dinner and give him flowers and murmur sweet words of affirmation into his ear. He lets the rapids of the river sweep him off his feet, and keeps his eyes closed against the current so that he doesn't have to see what he knows is sure to come.

“Will,” Jack says by way of greeting, stepping aside and opening his office door wider. “Come on in.”

He steps inside cautiously, unable to help his eyes darting around the cramped space. He’s only ever been in here once before, the day Il Mostro’s latest tableau had been discovered. He’d hardly had time to take in a breath before he was ushered out again, and that had been weeks ago.

This time, he lets himself look. This little room is at the center of a veritable maelstrom of campus rumors and local legends, since so few people are allowed or have ever been inside. He’s heard an impressive array of them, his favorite being the one claiming that there are guns displayed all over the walls and a closet in the corner of the room that doubles as a torture rack.

Of course, the walls are bereft of weapons and the contents of the shabby closet in the corner includes a single black coat, but he still feels like it’s an oddly significant moment to be called here, to have been invited. It’s a comfortable but oddly impersonal little nook of a room, bare walls and a window that overlooks the grounds and a cluttered desk at the far end.

Will sits in the single chair positioned in front of it, holding his bag awkwardly across his lap. Jack is busy muttering to himself and shuffling through stray papers, sweeping the mess away to make room for the file he’s holding. There’s a single photo on the desk propped up in a metal frame, turned away from Will.

It’s the only thing in the whole place that looks like it’s taken care of, polished to a gleaming silver and positioned with a care and attention that’s more than apparent. It sits in pride of place directly at the front of the desk, and he wonders whose photo it is, whose face Jack looks at every day, turns to it for stability and clarity and peace.

He tugs the oversized jacket he’s wearing tighter around his shoulders, feeling some of his discomfort ebb at the familiarity of the thick, soft fabric against his skin. It’s Hannibal’s jacket, the one he had lent to Will the day he had rescued Winston and forgotten to take back.

Will had intended to return it, but something had stopped him; he liked the sight of it hanging from a peg on his wall, incongruously fine and lavish among the rest of his shabby belongings.

And it smells like Hannibal, like the memory of that day. Rainwater and musk and expensive cologne, sweat and blood and skin. It's like having a piece of him with Will whenever he wears it, and it had quickly become a source of comfort whenever he feels particularly overwhelmed, perhaps a little too quickly.

He's found himself shutting his eyes and pressing his face into the fabric more times than he'd like to admit, inhaling the scent of it—of *him*—and feeling it flood his senses along with a sort of stability, one that he clings to like a life raft.

"About—" Will clears his throat. "About the crime scene, I—"

"Don't apologize for leaving, if that's what you were going to do," Jack says, still not looking up from the pile of papers he's leafing through. "I could see that you were overwhelmed, Will. I don't blame you for leaving. In fact, I blame myself for springing that on you the way I did, with very little preparation."

"I wanted to see it," Will says. "I signed up for this, Jack. That crime scene was preparation enough, because he's just getting started."

"Yes, he is." Jack finally set the pile of papers aside, leveling an unreadable expression at him. "So what did you think of it?"

"Of the body?"

"Of all of it. The body, the crime scene, the Monster himself."

"It was…" Will twists his hands into the straps of his bags, willing the familiar pressure to ground him. "It was meticulous. So carefully done, so elegant. It was like looking at an artist's work."

"So he has an eye for the aesthetic." Jack waves a hand. "We knew this already. The whole classical paintings angle, too. He likes this kind of stuff. Any motive?"

"Not really. All this, the displaying and the removal of organs, it's like he's humiliating his victims. Displaying them to the public to atone for their behavior."

"Behavior?"

"He kills on little more than a whim, and it's almost petulant," Will says. "People who are discourteous, or rude, or disrespectful. There'll be little to no link between the victims and Il Mostro."

"So he's a moralist and a psychopath."

"Not a moralist. A narcissist, and a sadist," Will says. "He thinks he's above the rest of humanity, and the removal of organs isn't postmortem. He does it… during."

Jack sighs, rubbing a hand across his face. “So how do we catch him?”

“Il Mostro is… singular. He wants to show off, wants to perform, and he wants credit for it. He wants people to know when he’s killed someone, wants people to know it’s him when they see the body.” He taps his feet against the floor rapidly, his train of thought beginning to pick up speed. “Someday he’s going to get caught up in his own cunning, his own beautiful genius.”

“We can’t afford to wait for him to slip up,” Jack says. “Tell me more about the body we saw.”

“The man who was killed,” Will says. “What do we know about him?”

“Not much.” Jack slides the file he had been holding over the desk. “He wasn’t anybody of note. A local shopkeeper.”

Will picks the file up, flipping through it. “What organs did he take besides the liver and intestines?”

“None; but he did make an incision over the kidneys. It seems like he might have been interrupted or cut short before he could take them though, because they’re still intact. Damaged, but intact.”

“Damaged how?”

“The victim was an alcoholic,” Jack says. “He had a chronic kidney disease.”

“So he didn’t take them because they were diseased.” Will shakes his head. “Brutalization and removal was done during and not postmortem?”

“Just like always.”

“What does he do with his surgical trophies?” he murmurs, half to himself. He remembers what Pazzi had said to him outside the crime scene: *“Just taking them is not enough for Il Mostro.”*

“How does it matter what he does with them?” Jack’s tone is dismissive. “He could be throwing them away or feeding them to dogs or pickling them for all I care. What matters is predicting him, catching him.”

“Figuring out what he does with the organs he takes is a part of understanding him, which is in turn a part of predicting him.” Will rubs a fingertip over the grainy-looking incisions he can see in the photos, done so neatly and so carefully. “Ergo we find out what he’s doing with his trophies, we catch him.”

Jack sighs, an exhale of defeat. “Fine. Any theories?”

“Four so far.” Will shuts the file with a snap, holding it up. “Can I keep this for a while?”

“Go right ahead.” Jack leans back, a glint in his eye. “You know, Will, with the right field training, you’d do a lot of good in the halls of the FBI back in the States.”

Will ducks his head. “I don’t think I’d fit in there.”

“Well, you’d help save a lot of lives should you ever change your mind.” He drags a hand down his face with another tired sigh. “So how did this body compare to the last one?”

“This one felt different,” he says. “It felt more personal this time. Like there might really have been some kind of motive. And it felt like… it almost felt like he was doing this for someone else.”

“Someone else? Who?”

“Someone he… cares about. Or he thinks he cares about them.”

“Is he capable of caring about another person at all?” Jack sounds doubtful. “Someone who can do something like this, I wouldn’t put it past him not to feel anything at all.”

“No,” Will says, eyes catching and holding on one of the photos of the crime scene on Jack’s desk, oversaturated and garish. It looks almost staged, fake even, with red food dye and corn syrup spilling out of drawn-on wounds and staining the cobblestones scarlet. “No, he feels. Maybe even more acutely than the rest of us, since it’s such a rare thing for him to find someone worthy of his emotion.”

“How does he feel?” Jack asks. “How does he think?”

Will sighs, setting the file down. “The Monster feels… he doesn’t feel like a person. He doesn’t think like anyone else I’ve—” He swallows. “Like anyone else. He has this detached way of looking at the world, like it’s all an elaborate, pretty stage that’s been set up just for his amusement, with puppets dancing around and singing their silly little tunes. And he’s holding all the strings.”

“So he fancies himself God?”

“No.” Will shakes his head, thinking of the whimsical amusement that had sung through his veins as he’d watched himself kill that man, ripping out his insides before positioning him to perfection, an almost childlike delight. The arrogance, the thrill of defiance. “No, he fancies himself *better*.”

“Well.” Jack rubs at his temples. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves quite the madman.”

“He’s not mad.” The words are sharp, probably sharper than they should be, and he bites down hard on his tongue the moment they pass his lips. “He’s not insane, Jack. He’s… he’s something else. There isn’t a name for what he is.”

There’s a pause. “How does the Monster feel to you?” Jack asks quietly.

“He feels like… he feels like a mirror,” Will says. “Like one of those mirrors you’d go into a funhouse to look into and laugh at when you see your mangled, distorted reflection staring

back. Upside down and stretched out sideways, warped and contorted but resembling you just enough not to be beyond recognition. Someone you recognize but ultimately don't know."

The words feel like they've dragged themselves out of him against his will, brutal and ugly and the most honest he thinks he's ever been. He lapses into silence, his face burning with what can only be shame. Jack is looking at him, merely looking at him, and Will can't quite tell why but there's suddenly an indescribable sadness in his face, and a terrible guilt so powerful that Will can feel it eating away at his own consciousness. It feels like acid burning him bitter and hot, corroding him from the inside out.

"We are going to catch this man," Jack says finally, and his voice is so soft Will barely hears him. "I am going to catch him if it's the last thing I do."

"Don't," Will says. "Don't say that, Jack."

"Why not?"

"Because," Will says, "it just might be."

The late afternoon sun casts long shadows down the crowded street, coating it in dark golden light that drips off everything it touches like honey. The college campus is teeming with students and professors alike, all having spilled outside into the grassy quadrangle to enjoy a few rare hours of sunlight before the inevitable rain returns.

Hannibal's eyes skip over them all, uninterested and slightly bored. Nobody here is of note, the usual morbidly wearisome and monotonous life lived over and over again; he catches snatches of conversation about classes to take and parties to attend, the shallow rapids of transient existences flowing around the unmoving stone anchored into its riverbed.

Mischa had been fascinated by all this—by people. She had loved people, loved talking to them and knowing them, loved how everyone around them had lives of their own. An inextricably tangled web of thoughts and connections and existences that everyone was ensnared in, somehow or the other.

You cannot escape it, he remembers she had said to him one day, both lying on the roof of one of the abandoned townhouses in the city and watching the crowds go by below and the crows fly by overhead. *The human condition is to be alive.*

He wonders, as he raises his head to watch as the clock in the middle of the square begins to chime six, what she would say if she were to see him now; what he is, what he's become, what he does for her. Would he end it in her name, or does it endure in her name?

A fresh wave of students flood from the building to his right, pulling him back to the present and choking the air with the sight and sound and smell of them, stifling and near-overwhelming. He makes no move to acknowledge any of them as they pass, though he feels many of their eyes on him—some appreciative or envious, others curious or shameless.

One of the girls that passes by arm in arm with her friend turns her head to rake her eyes up his body with thinly veined scorn and something almost like disgust, her gaze as it sweeps up the length of him catching and lingering on his shoes, his tie, his hair. Her lip curls upward in a sneer.

She turns back to her friend with a toss of her red mane over her shoulder, and loud enough for him to hear she says in a stage whisper, *"Finocchio."*

He watches them go, heads together and bracelets jangling on their wrists as they lift their hands to their mouths and giggle. It would be easy, laughably so, to find out who they are, where they live, what they do and where they go. He could follow them both one night, empty the fuel tank of their car and wait for it to sputter to a halt on the side of the road on an empty lane.

He would position them like *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers* perhaps, hanging side by side. String them up like marionettes by their own intestines, loop them around their ankles and display them upside down in an archway. He would slit them open from throat to navel and make them watch themselves and each other bleed to death, and take his time cutting into them careful and unhurried. He would take their hearts, their kidneys, their lungs, their livers. Then he would let them die.

He would cook them in a feast for Will. He would seat him at the counter with a glass of wine, framed by his reproduction of Klimt's *Death and Life*, placing him squarely between them so that Death's skull watches him with as much veneration as Hannibal does.

He would admire the sparkle it lends to his eye, the relaxed line of his shoulders framed by the writhing fire that wreaths him in pulsing amber light. He would set the laden dish down before him and watch as he lowers his eyes and cuts into the meat, watch him lift it to his lips and swallow every bite willing and eager and sweetly oblivious.

Someday, he thinks, he will join Hannibal at his table knowing full well what—and who—he's serving, will hunt with him underneath moonlight that turns blood into pitch and death into art. He will watch Will's becoming bloom like the sticky crimson petals of a monstrous flower, blossoming into a beautiful nightmare.

As if conjured by the vividity of Hannibal's imagination he emerges from the double doors of one of the buildings, his head down and his bag clutched to his chest. Though caught in the current of a veritable sea of people he leaps out to Hannibal as if he were limned in the harsh white glow of a spotlight, clear and bright and extraordinary among his unremarkable peers.

He is a wolf among sheep, Will Graham, a predator wearing the skin of prey like armor to shield himself. Sometimes Hannibal dreams of digging his fingers underneath the edges of it and prizing it off him, dreams of tearing skin where it's fused to his flesh. Deliver him raw and flayed open to the world anew, a butterfly emerging bloody and victorious from its chrysalis.

Will weaves through the crowd with an ease and skill that betrays years of practice of making himself invisible, his head still down. Hannibal's eyes linger on the worn collar of his shirt and the faded black of his slacks, displeased. Perhaps one day he will allow Hannibal to purchase a new set of clothes for him, ones tailored to fit him perfectly.

He would look ravishing in dark blue, or perhaps a deep red. Shirts and trousers and coats, clothes that would sweep up the whole slender length of him and cling just so to his shoulders, his waist, his chest. Revealing plenty yet hiding just enough to be tantalizing.

As he watches Will pulls the too-large jacket he's wearing tighter around his shoulders, fingers clutching at the gray tweed fabric as if to anchor himself. Familiar, Hannibal thinks, and then realizes a moment later that it's *his* jacket, albeit a shade more worn and creased than he remembers it. He had nearly forgotten that Will had it.

A lick of something slow and hot curls up in his blood at the sight of Will dressed in his clothes, a physical mark of Hannibal's presence in his life. A part of him wants to pull him close and draw in the scent of him, of both of them intertwined inseparably. Wonders what they smell like together.

He stands here most days, cloaked in the shadows between the archways and out of sight. He may command the gaze but he knows how to disappear, knows exactly where to stand so as not to be seen. He has come to learn what time Will leaves every day, the route he takes to go home, the bakery he stops by every other day to pick up a loaf of ciabatta or a batch of tigella for Emiliano.

But there is something about the nature of this particular day—it might be the way Will is walking, or the fact that he is wearing Hannibal's jacket—that makes him step into the light, allowing himself to be seen. He knows that even though Will's eyes are trained on the ground, he will realize he is there.

Surely enough beautifully broken blue eyes catch on him mere moments later, sliding past him before darting back and locking back onto him, widening fractionally in surprise. It's replaced quickly by a sort of guarded suspicion and uncertainty, one that clouds his pale face as he comes to a stop in front of him.

"Hannibal?" he says.

“Hello, Will.” The crowd is but a blur in his periphery, paling to insignificance and flowing around them faraway and unimportant. “You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I admit I thought I had.” A tremulous smile curves his lips. “It’s strange; I was just thinking about you as I was walking and then I looked up, and there you were. For a second I almost thought I made you up, that it was just a mirage. That you weren’t really here.”

Hannibal is willing to admit it to himself, that what had begun that day so many days ago when he first met Will in the Uffizi beneath *Primavera* as a slow coal-hot burn of intrigue and curiosity, has been fed and fanned into a veritable blaze of obsession.

Slowly Hannibal reaches out, fingers gently encircling Will’s wrist. His skin is smooth and warm, and he’s skinny enough that Hannibal’s fingers engulf his wrist, overlapping slightly over the delicate tracery of blue-green veins on the sensitive underside. His pulse jumps beneath Hannibal’s fingers, erratic and quick as a frightened bird soaring higher and higher.

“I am here,” Hannibal says. “I assure you I am quite real, Will.”

A charming flush flares in Will’s cheeks, his pulse continuing to thrum wildly beneath Hannibal’s grip. “I—good,” is all he says, and his voice is just as uneven as his heartbeat. “What are you doing here?”

“I had a free few hours after attending my own lectures for the day,” he says. “I thought I would come see you.”

“You’re studying to be a surgeon, I can’t imagine how much work you have to do,” Will says, and now there’s something almost like reproach in the gentle curve of his frown, in the divot creasing between his brows. “I’m sure you have more important things to do, Hannibal.”

“My list of priorities has long since run into the innumerable,” he acknowledges, “but you have always been near the very top, Will. I assure you I am skilled at managing several tasks at once; I can manage my work and still have the time to indulge you. It is what I wish to do.”

“Well, in that case.” Will’s smile is wry twist of his lips. “Indulge away.”

“Oh, I will.” He loops his hands behind his back. “You seem weary, Will. A long day of classes?”

“Yes and no.” Will drags a hand down his face. “I just met with my criminal psychology professor.”

“The professor who consults on Il Mostro’s cases?”

“The same.” He sighs. “It’s the first time he’s asked to meet about this since the—” His voice drops. “The last kill.”

“It is taxing,” Hannibal deduces. “Demands as much from your mind as it does your body, perhaps even more. Why do you do it?”

“I want to,” Will says, drawing himself up. Righteous, Hannibal thinks, reckless. A white knight, ready to throw himself in between the people he protects and hell itself if he has to. “I save lives.”

“Is that all?” He raises an eyebrow, and Will’s cheeks redden further.

“I—it interests me,” he admits, and he sounds almost guilty. Hannibal wishes he could tell him he needn’t feel guilt, not for something like this. If only he knows that the quarry he is hunting is stalking him in turn, two predators circling each other in a deadly dance.

“Nobody else really understands,” he mutters, scuffing the ground with the tip of a shoe. “Even Jack, he only wants to catch Il Mostro, he doesn’t really want to understand him. He’s fascinating, a blend of so many personality types. Jack says he’s a psychopath and maybe he is, but he feels so intensely and I can feel it, through his incisions and mutilations and his theatrical performances.”

He glances up at Hannibal with another guilty smile. “Sorry.”

“You said it interests you,” Hannibal says mildly, even as something in his chest twists excruciatingly at his words, crying out almost as if wishing to hear an answer. Knowing he *can* hear an answer after what feels like a lifetime of howling into the chasm and hearing nothing but the cruel, taunting whistle of the wind. “And what interests you interests me, Will.”

Will’s flush deepens and his eyes drop fractionally, lingering on the collar of his shirt. A defense mechanism, one he has near-perfected over the years, over quiet but startling realizations that he sees too much in the eyes of others, and that what he sees is rarely ever kind.

His fingers find the hem of his jacket again, tugging almost absentmindedly. A clutch for comfort, he realizes, for stability. Hannibal finds his eyes tracking the movement, gratification like tendrils of steam uncurling slow and hot inside him.

“The color suits you,” he offers, nodding at it. The realization as it suffuses Will is a sudden, tangible thing, rolling off him in waves as his eyes widen.

“Oh, God, this is yours, isn’t it?” he says, ducking his head and nearly dropping his bag in his haste to shuck the jacket off. “I’m sorry, I completely forgot—”

“Keep it,” Hannibal says, reaching out to put a hand on his arm and stop him. “I find I rather like the sight of it on you better than I do anywhere else.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, even as he starts to tug the jacket up to his shoulders again.

“I am.” He steps up behind Will, his hands going automatically to the hem of the jacket to help pull it up his arms and settle it over his shoulders. It nearly swallows him whole, and almost involuntarily Hannibal finds himself drawing in a deep breath, feeling the scent of him settle heady and sweet in his lungs. Cologne and damp earth after a rain, dog fur and dust. Himself and Will, singular yet conjoined.

“Join me for dinner tonight,” he says as he steps away, letting him go rather regretfully. “I have enough ingredients as well as enough wine for two.”

“Is this how you intend on winning my hand?” Will squints up at him. “Buttering me up by feeding me home-cooked meals all the time? One would think you’re preparing to cook me someday.”

If only you knew. “I daresay it is working, if your reaction is anything to go by.” He holds out an arm. “And I am sure you would taste positively divine, dear Will.”

Will rolls his eyes, but loops his arm through Hannibal’s all the same. “Spare me the theatrics and just make me dinner, Hannibal,” he says.

Hannibal smiles beatifically. “As you wish, *mio caro*.”

“Tell me about the body,” Hannibal says.

Will frowns at the bit of meat he’s mincing, looking up a moment later at where Hannibal is standing at the counter opposite him, his apron around his waist and a knife of his own in his hands. “I don’t think that would be particularly appetizing conversation, Hannibal,” he says.

“You said you wish to talk about it.” Hannibal raises a brow. “And I am willing to listen. There is a very particular gleam in your eye I see whenever you talk about the Monster, Will. Far be it from me to dampen it with more civil talk.”

“A gleam in my eye for a serial killer.” The words are exhaled on the heels of a humorless scoff, and he can’t quite bring himself to meet Hannibal’s eye. “What must you think of me?”

“Only that you are unlike anyone I’ve ever met, and I have met a great many people. Your fascination with Il Mostro does not make you bad company, Will.”

“Then what does it make me?”

“Singular.”

Will sets his knife down. “It was a gift,” he blurts, before he can stop himself. “The latest body, it was done for someone else. For himself too, in some way, but it was like… like he was giving it to somebody the way you would give someone a bouquet of flowers.”

“So he cares for this somebody,” Hannibal says, lifting his head to meet Will’s eye. “To whatever capacity of which he is capable.”

“Yes.” Will worries at his lower lip, feeling the bruised and abused skin finally give way and split. The coppery tang of blood fills his mouth, and he swallows it down. “Or he’s beginning to.”

“Thus far the victims have all been impersonal, have they not?”

“Not impersonal, not exactly,” Will says haltingly. “They’re like punishments for whoever he kills and puts on display. They’re all people he considers discourteous.”

“A killer with a moral compass,” Hannibal says.

“In his eyes, yes. In reality he’s more of a killer with a god complex.” Will sighs, rubbing at his eyes. “He’s extraordinarily, intensely lonely. A man with no equals on this earth, nobody out there who thinks like him or can even come close to thinking like him. Nobody who can love him and nothing that can quench his boredom and satiate his appetite.”

There’s a long, heavy pause, and all Will can hear is the gentle crackle of the fire in the grate and the sizzle of the stove. His eyes are still closed and in the darkness behind his eyelids the wide, haunted eyes of Il Mostro’s latest victim burn like a brand, searing themselves into his mind.

“You said he did this for someone,” Hannibal’s voice says finally, softly. “Has he perhaps found someone at last? Someone to love?”

“I don’t know,” Will says, his eyes opening, seeking and finding Hannibal’s over the counter. “I’m not sure. He doesn’t love like the rest of us.”

“Not everyone is worthy of it,” Hannibal murmurs, looking down again, his head canted down over the meat he’s cutting careful and precise. His face is entirely closed in concentration, his hands steady as his eyes as he slices through the meat. For a single wild moment Will sees a bloody, mutilated body underneath his blade instead, wide darting eyes and agonized cries—

He looks up and Will starts, the dream shattering into a thousand shards of glass in his hands, sharp enough to cut. He looks quickly at his own knife, his blood roaring in his ears and his heart hammering.

“No,” he agrees, keeping his gaze trained on the cutting board so he doesn’t have to meet Hannibal’s. He feels almost ashamed, as if Hannibal can see it in his eyes, what he dreams about every night. “He’s not like everyone else, and neither is his love. It would take

someone as singular as him to even strive for it, and someone who's not just his equal but maybe even his superior to deserve it."

"And when he finds that someone?"

Will huffs out an ironic chuckle. "If his mild annoyance looks like this, I shiver to think what his hatred looks like. But his love?"

He shakes his head, and his voice is quiet when he speaks again. "His love would burn down the world."

Neither of them speak after that, steeping in a silence that stretches thick and heavy. It makes the wine glitter like liquid jewels as Hannibal pours each of them a glass, and if he tilts his head just so it almost looks like blood.

It feels as though Il Mostro has been taking up all the space inside his head as of late, his mind crammed full of him with room for little else. The nature of this last kill unsettles him, an itch in the space where his bones meet. The motive, the kidneys being left intact. It had thrown him off, had confused him. Il Mostro does not kill for others, nor does he leave organs behind—so why is he doing it now?

And he takes trophies, takes them only if they're whole and not damaged. He could be gifting them to someone, maybe, but how? There isn't a sustainable way he could be giving people's organs to somebody, unless…

The realization dawns as slow, sure and absolute as the sun sinking below the horizon; inevitable and undeniable and plunging everything into darkness. It disappears beneath the curvature of the earth in a searing flash of bloodred and gold, blinding him for a moment—and then suddenly he *knows*.

He comes to an abrupt halt in the middle of slicing into the meat, the world seeming to skid to a standstill around him for a few seconds. Everything recedes like the sea pulling away from the shore, gathering into a massive tidal wave that looms above him, blotting out the sky.

He's lurching away from the counter and towards Hannibal before he even realizes it, his body reacting before his mind can catch up. "Hannibal," he says, the words nearly tumbling over and under each other in his haste to get them out, "I need to—do you have a phone? I need to use it, right now."

"Will?" He looks up, his lips curving into a frown. "What—"

"I'll explain later, just—I need to call someone." His pulse is thrumming wildly, an uneven staccato beneath his skin. "It's urgent."

"Just through there." He gestures at the living room. "On the table by the desk."

He's already turning away before Hannibal can even finish saying it, half-running into the living room and fetching up near the fireplace. He spots the phone sitting on the table, and

with shaking hands he yanks the phone off the hook and punches in the number he needs, fingers flying over the keys. It rings one, twice, thrice—and then he hears a click as the call connects.

“Jack,” he gasps without preamble, “I know what he’s doing with them, I know what he’s doing with the trophies.” He feels out of breath, his heart slamming against the inside of his ribs like a caged beast roaring to be set free.

“Will?” Jack’s voice crackles through the speaker, faint and uneven. “Slow down. What are you trying to tell me?”

“I figured out what Il Mostro is doing with the organs he takes,” Will says, his sweaty hands slipping as they clutch the phone to his ear. “Why he waits between batches of kills—*sounders*, that’s what they are, sounders of kills. They’re nothing more to him than pigs.”

“Tell me what he’s doing with them.” Jack’s voice is hard and steady.

Will closes his eyes, letting out a shaky breath and feeling a sort of crushing inevitability settle unimaginably heavy over his shoulders. He feels as though he had known all along, a truth he had realized long ago but had chosen to ignore—a truth that bursts fully formed like Athena into the forefront of his mind in all its horrible, elegant poetry.

“He’s eating them,” he says.

Vedi la Bestia

Chapter Notes

content warning for canon-typical gore and violence, and a brief mention of incest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next two weeks, Il Mostro kills three more times.

The bodies are all garlanded and adorned and displayed meticulously as they always are, the careful incisions hidden underneath flowers or fabric betraying their true nature. Bodies are autopsied and evidence is interpreted, and then suddenly it's undeniable, irrefutable. It doesn't take long for word to spread in the Questura, that Il Mostro is a cannibal.

The first sounder had been just outside the city limits, a tableau of three; a woman holding the head of a man in one hand and a blade in the other, her dark hair unbound and curling gently in the wind. Another woman was positioned behind her, her chest torn open.

"Judith with the Head of Holofernes," Will had said immediately upon seeing it. "Cristofano Allori."

"There's no blood," Jack had said, Detective Paolo scowling behind him. "Did he drain them?"

"He killed them somewhere else, then brought them here to display them." It wasn't cold, but Will had still been shivering. "He took their hearts. All three of them."

"Why?"

"I don't know, maybe he fancied some tartare over the weekend."

"Will," Jack had sighed. "Just tell me why."

"He was an unfaithful husband," Will said after a moment.

"So he made it look like she killed him and cut off his head?"

"No." A humorless smile twisted his mouth. His eyes had been clinging to the blade clutched in the dead woman's limp fingers, shining and free of blood and gore. "She's not the one holding his head. The woman he cheated with is."

Jack's brows had drawn together. "What?"

“His wife was unfaithful, too,” Will had said. “They were both cheating on each other with the same woman, and neither of them told her. This was her revenge.”

“But she’s dead, too,” Jack had pointed out.

“Yeah, well.” He glanced away. “Il Mostro considered her rude anyway.”

The second kill had been a woman positioned on a makeshift throne, a blade in her hand and a globe perched on her knee. She had been slit open from her throat till her stomach, hollowed out and emptied. Her eyes had been gouged out, her fingers broken and bent into grotesque claws.

A judge, he had realized once he opened his eyes and returned to himself, and not a particularly impartial one. Punished for every miscarriage of justice she had orchestrated.

“I suppose you can tell us exactly which artwork this is as well?” Paolo had said with a sneer. Jack had been consulting with the paramedics out of earshot, his back turned.

“Giustizia,” was all Will had said in reply, not looking away from the body. “Piero del Pollaiolo. *Non sei mai stato le Gallerie Degli Uffizi, Investigatore?”*

He had scowled and turned on his heel, stalking away. Will had turned his head to watch him go, hands stuffed into his pockets to hide the tremor in his fists. Pazzi had shot him an apologetic look and hurried after his partner, leaving Will alone with Il Mostro’s latest spectacle.

The last tableau had been a display of three just as the first had been—a man, a woman and a child, barely four or five years old. The policemen had all averted their eyes and muttered among themselves, and even Jack had looked away. Will had recognized it as *Madonna of the Harpies* from his many trips to the Uffizi, recreated in blood and silk.

“The child was the product of an incestuous relationship,” he had said, nodding at the man and woman whose bloody corpses are decked in finery, the man holding a cross with his throat slit wide open. The dead child is in its mother’s arms, her own neck hanging by ragged flaps of skin. “That’s why he killed them.”

“How is that you know all that just by looking at it?” one of the policemen had asked curiously, and Paolo had laughed derisively, stepping forward to mutter something into his ear. He had looked at Will with wide, scared eyes, then turned and hurried away. Will hadn’t asked what Paolo had said, but he thinks he had known anyway as he turned back to the bodies with his throat closing up.

He knows that the policemen and detectives at the Questura don’t trust him, knows that the only reason they tolerate him is because of Jack. He knows half of them believe that he has something to do with all this, and that the other half think he’s insane.

Sometimes he wonders if they’re right, watching the crimes piece themselves together like an elaborate puzzle in his head, not a piece out of place. Wonders if he’s too close to this, to the

Monster. Subsuming himself into his head, into the beautiful horror of his design until he loses himself entirely.

“It’s like… like we’re both a part of each other,” he tells Hannibal one day, both sitting on Will’s cramped little balcony watching the sun go down over the city, Hannibal leaning against the door with Will’s head in his lap. “Like a piece of him lives in me and a piece of me lives in him.”

Hannibal’s hand is tangled in Will’s hair, long slender fingers winding his curls around them. “Freeing yourself from him and him freeing himself from you, they are the same?”

“We’re conjoined,” he murmurs in agreement, his eyes slipping closed. “I’m… curious, whether either of us will survive separation.”

“It does not have to be something to be afraid of, or ashamed of,” Hannibal says. “You are not becoming him, Will.”

“Jack said he would make sure I didn’t get too close to this,” he says. “And he is, but I don’t think I ever wanted him to.”

“The very first time we met you told me you admired him,” Hannibal says, fingers curling gently in the soft hair at his nape. “It is natural, to want to get close to the mind of someone you admire.”

“Is it wrong? To want to know someone like him?”

“No. It is not, Will.”

“He’s not… a good person. He’s a killer. He mutilates people while they’re still alive, then displays them like paintings. He harvests their organs and—”

He clamps down on the words, squeezing his eyes shut. He hadn’t told Hannibal what he had realized that night as they had made dinner, that Il Mostro eats the evidence he takes from his victims. It feels almost like a secret, something that would take his tentative admiration and mutate it into a hideous thing, repulsive and unnatural.

“That is not what you admire,” Hannibal says, his thumb stroking gently across the arch of Will’s cheek. “Not entirely, at any rate.”

“No,” he says on exhale of breath, opening his eyes. Hannibal is looking back at him, his expression soft and fond, the dying sunlight bathing his face in an artful chiaroscuro and turning him into a study in charcoal and ink. The shadows gather in the hollows of his cheeks and jaw, turning his eyes into fathomless pools of blood. Even now, after all these weeks, Will still thinks he’s the most beautiful man he’s ever seen.

“You sure you still want to be seen in public with me? The strange kid obsessed with a serial killer?” he teases, a hand coming up to tangle with Hannibal’s where it still rests gently on his cheek, and Hannibal smiles.

“However strange you are convinced you are, I assure you Will, I am much stranger.” He lifts their entwined hands to his lips, pressing a brief kiss to his knuckles. “And there is nothing more I want than to be seen with you. Now come, let’s go downstairs. Emiliano and Winston are likely wreaking havoc in the kitchen, and we must rescue dinner.”

He stands and pulls Will up by his hand, and laughing, all thoughts of the Monster emptied from his mind for the moment, Will follows.

The bus grinds to a screeching halt at the Via dei Calzaiuoli, atypically deserted what with the lateness of the hour and the rain that’s been pouring in sheets from the heavens for hours. The gleaming cobbles that line the street are littered with moons, one shining like a silver coin in each puddle.

It had been a long day at the morgue, body after body laid out on metal racks with the sterile lights overhead casting their arctic, sinister glow over the precise incisions, the beautiful mutilations like brushstrokes across the canvas of a masterpiece.

He had watched as they examined each and every one, checking over and over again for fingerprints, for stray bits of skin or hair, for anything at all. But they had found nothing. Il Mostro doesn’t make mistakes, he doesn’t leave anything behind, and he doesn’t leave evidence—he eats it.

Will pulls his jacket tighter around his shoulders, turning his collar up against the cold as he makes his way across the road. It’s a futile precaution against the storm and he winces as the world goes white for a split second, a crack of lightning fissuring through the clouds and rending the sky in two.

His shoes are soaked through with water by the time he splashes onto his little side street, and as he fumbles his keys out of his pocket he hears a deafening boom of thunder, rolling through the sky and ringing in his ears.

He feels it before he even opens the door.

The street is silent and empty, the cold wind whispering its secrets to the doors and windows that rattle loudly in its wake. A slow, sinuous snake of unease, of intuition curls up in his gut, its tail rattling danger. The very air feels wrong, too still and quiet and settling in his lungs like acrid smoke when he breathes it in.

Something is wrong.

Slowly, carefully, he reaches out, fingers gently encircling the doorknob. It spins loosely in his hand, the door slipping open the barest fraction of an inch beneath the slight pressure; the lock has been broken.

His pulse quickens, his mouth drying up as he pushes the door open soundlessly, stepping inside the entryway. Everything is still and calm with nothing out of place, eerily so but for a single thing that draws his attention, leaping out at him—Emiliano's door is open. And there's an unmistakable smear of something dark and red on the wood, still shining and fresh.

Any and all thoughts of subtlety and the element of surprise scatter from his mind like shrapnel, disappearing into the roaring hurricane of anger and panic that replaces it. He can feel his feet planted firmly in the center, can feel himself standing in the eye of the storm as it razes the whole world to the ground around him, calm and indifferent to it all.

He stalks forward, kicking the door open the rest of the way with a loud bang. The flat is as quiet as the rest of the street, just as uncannily unchanged. Everything seems entirely normal, nothing out of the ordinary at all; but he can feel an undercurrent of cold in the air, like pins and needles on the back of his neck. Like he's being watched.

Will ducks into the kitchen for a moment, grabbing up one of Emiliano's bread knives before striding into the apartment, his grip white-knuckled on the handle. Here, there are signs of a struggle; an overturned vase, a fallen table whose surface is covered in spiderwebbing cracks, books scattered across the floor.

In the very last room down the hall he finds Emiliano. He's leaning against the wall, his eyes closed, and Will drops to his knees beside him. "Emiliano—"

His eyes open halfway, and the relief knocks the breath out of him for a moment. "Guglielmo," he murmurs. "Don't worry about me, I'm fine—he came for the little one."

"What?" He's still gripping the bread knife. "Winston?"

"He went upstairs when he saw you were not here," Emiliano says, his eyes closing again. There's a blossom of blood spreading across his gray hair. "Go. I'm fine."

"I'll call an ambulance," Will says, already scrambling to his feet. "Stay here, Emiliano."

He moves as fast as he can, sprinting up the steps, his heart hammering, and bursts into his apartment expecting a mugger or a robber or Winston's previous owner, the man in the alleyway. Instead he sees—

“Detective Paolo?” He skids to a stop, breathing hard. Winston is curled up in a corner, whimpering softly. “What are you—what—”

He hears a deafening bang ring out, and launches himself instinctively to the side. He rolls and slams into the wall, his fingers tightening on the knife’s handle. He hears another bang, and the crack of wood splintering a moment after. He scrambles backward on his hands and knees, adrenaline flooding into his blood.

“What the hell are you—”

“Shut up,” the detective hisses, his gun still pointed at Will. “I know what you are. I know what you’ve done.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“Your dog,” he snarls. “He told me you had the dog, and I almost didn’t believe it. But then I came here, and I saw it with my own eyes. I know what you did to him.”

“What are you—”

The gun goes off again and Will ducks, feeling the bullet punch through the floor not an inch away from his face. When he raises his head again the door is swinging closed and he can hear footsteps descending the stairs rapidly, then the front door opening.

Whatever he believes, Will knows he can’t let him go. Cursing under his breath, he gives chase, his fingers still clenched around the handle of the knife. He takes the stairs five at a time, spilling into the entryway and bursting out the front doors, catching a flash of black duck into the alleyway across the street.

He follows, and a moment later he goes sprawling, hitting the ground hard. Paolo looms over him, teeth bared in a rictus snarl and his gun still clutched in his hands. He draws his foot back and then pain erupts in his ribs, spreading out like wildfire. He gasps, winded and unable to breathe, and Paolo laughs, kicking him again. This time, he hears his ribs crack.

It feels like it goes on forever, his skin ripping and bruising beneath his fists and his feet. He tries to raise an arm, to fight back, but there’s little he can do. Every time he tries, he’s kicked down again. After what could be years or minutes Paolo leans over him, rage in every line of his face.

“I know what you are,” he says again. “And I will tell everyone, and they will see I was right all along.”

He raises his gun—and then he jerks back with a strangled yell, the hilt of a knife protruding from the side of his neck.

He stumbles away, his gun clattering to the ground, and yanks the knife out. Blood gushes from the hole in his neck in forceful gouts, drenching the cobbles and his clothes and Will’s skin in a crimson tide. He pulls in gasping breaths, but it’s already too late. He falls, and he’s dead before he hits the ground.

Will staggers to his feet, fetching up against the wall and breathing hard. He can't quite comprehend any of it—the last few minutes, the knife that had been in his hand one minute and in Paolo's neck the next, the dead man at his feet.

Then he turns and runs.

He leaves the street on legs barely able to support him, half-dragging himself every excruciating step until he spots it—a lone phone booth on the corner of the road, a single naked bulb flickering ominously inside. His knees give way when he's nearly at the door, and he crawls the rest of the way, feeling rainwater and mud seep through his clothes and crust his skin.

His bloodied fingers drag across the keypad, moving automatically over the buttons and punching in the number from pure muscle memory. They leave crimson smears behind on the dirty metal, dark red in the dim light. The world tilts alarmingly around him, spinning and blurring and fading as the line rings and rings and rings in his ear.

It connects after what feels like a lifetime, and he hears a voice on the other end say, "Hello?"

Everything crystallizes and solidifies brutally clear and still for a single split second, familiarity and relief flooding into his system like a drug and holding the pain at bay. He almost sobs at the abatement, his next rattling inhale going easier.

"Hannibal," he rasps, the word half a whisper scraping past his throat. He tries to speak again, but his voice seems to have tightened like a fist that's jammed into his throat, choking him.

"Will? What happened?" He sounds concerned, almost afraid—and in all the weeks Will has known him, he has never known him to be afraid. But he is now, and Will knows it's for him. He clings to the knowledge like a lifeline, forcing himself not to lose consciousness.

"Hannibal," he whispers again, and he feels a warm trickle of blood drip from the corner of his mouth and spatter on the floor. "Help…"

"Will? Where are you? Stay there, I'm coming—"

"He came for… for Winston," he says, and every word hurts. "He had a gun."

"Will," Hannibal's voice says urgently, and now even that is beginning to fade. "Stay exactly where you are. I'm coming to get you."

"Hannibal," he hears himself say again, his name breathed out like a sigh, and then his fingers slip on the plastic of the phone, too weak to hold it up. It hits the wall beside him with a clatter, swinging back and forth on its cord like a pendulum.

Everything comes apart after that, fracturing into a thousand shards of glass whose edges are sharp enough to cut. They drag over his skin, opening him up and staining them with his blood, and he isn't quite sure if it's real or not. He feels oddly as though he's dreaming,

caught in a haze of pain and delirium and the horrible, ugly truth of what had happened, of what he had done.

He feels the excruciating minutes crawl by, feeling oddly detached from his own body, as though he were watching himself from behind a misted windowpane. He registers the cold of the glass behind him and the faint echo of the phone's dial tone ringing incessantly from where it's still hanging from the cord beside him, hears the sound of the storm still wailing its mournful symphony outside.

He isn't sure how much time passes as he sits there alone, crouched on the floor of a grimy, decrepit phone booth with every inch of his body aching and stinging and throbbing. He's only partly conscious for most of it, everything cutting in and out of focus like a mirage flickering to life before dying again, disappearing into the recesses of his mind.

When Hannibal comes, he isn't sure if that's real either. He allows the slender line between dream and reality to blur, allows himself to drift in some murky in-between as he picks Will up and carries him in his arms, cradling him against his chest and shielding him against the rain. He allows himself to close his eyes and rest his head against Hannibal's chest, hearing the solidity of his heartbeat like a steady rhythm against his cheek. Sometimes he thinks it's the steadiest thing in his life.

Eventually Hannibal sets him down, and he can't feel the rain anymore. Streaks of light and shadow pass by somewhere in his periphery, and in the back of his mind he registers that they're moving. They're in a car then, likely Hannibal's. He's never even seen Hannibal's car before, and now he's getting blood and rainwater all over it.

"Sorry," he mumbles, and his lips feel stiff and numb.

"Sorry?" His voice is strained, and Will can't quite put his finger on why. "Why?"

"Ruining your car," he manages, and he sounds crazy even to his own ears. "Leather seat. Blood."

"That is the last thing on my mind, Will." A moment later a warm hand comes to rest on his shoulder, and he thinks it may be shaking. So that's what he can hear in his voice.

He scarcely registers the rest of the drive, barely even realizes it when Hannibal opens the car door and picks him up again as if he weighs nothing. He carries Will up the stairs to his apartment and into the bathroom, and sets him down in the elegant claw-footed bathtub.

He has to bite his tongue to stop another apology from slipping past his lips; he's filthy, grimy and bloody and dripping wet, a blight in Hannibal's beautiful and spotless bathroom with its marble floors and burnished silver fixtures. Out of place, just as he is in every other facet of Hannibal's life.

He closes his eyes when Hannibal removes his clothes, not wanting to see what's left of him after the fight and the crawl through the rain and mud and filth. He keeps them shut as Hannibal drags a warm wet cloth down every inch of him, impossibly gentle and careful and

soft, as he dabs at his open wounds with stinging liquid, as he stitches a weeping gash across his arm shut.

“Don’t go inside, Will,” his voice says quietly. “You’ll want to retreat. To punish yourself, to hurt yourself. To throw yourself across the rails as the train approaches swift and sure.”

He gently lifts Will’s arm, beginning to wrap a length of gauze around the stitched wound. “Stay with me,” he says.

Will doesn’t open his eyes. “Where else would I go?”

“You have everywhere to go.” His hands withdraw, and Will feels the absence of his touch like a physical blow. “You needn’t tell me what happened, Will. But if you do, I will listen, and I will offer you my help. I can help you tell the version of events you want to be told.”

Finally Will opens his eyes. Hannibal is kneeling beside him, jacket eschewed and shirtsleeves rolled up, blood staining the white cotton in splotches of pink. Will isn’t sure how much of it is his and how much of it is Paolo’s.

“I can help you,” Hannibal says, “if you ask me to.”

“Hannibal,” he breathes, “will you help me?”

“Of course I will.” His face is guileless, open, but Will still feels as though he’s made a deal with the devil. A bargain sealed in blood that will cost him his soul, and one that can only end in fire. “What happened, Will?”

“I killed him,” Will whispers. “He’s dead.”

“Who was he?”

“A detective at the Questura. He broke into the apartment, hurt Emiliano. He was looking for me.”

“You said he came for Winston.”

“He was saying something about a dog,” Will says. “He saw Winston, and he… it was like he realized something. He came after me. He was going to kill me. I could see it, *feel* it. He had a gun, I had a knife. I don’t know how it happened, but then suddenly he was—and there was blood everywhere, and I was standing over him, and he was—he was—”

“Will, breathe.” Hannibal’s hand comes to rest on his back, fingers splayed over his shoulder blades. The pressure anchors him, and he drags in a shuddering lungful of air. It feels like acid in his lungs, burning all the way down.

“He was dead.” The words are horribly final, ugly almost, tarnishing the inside of his mouth once they leave it. “I killed him.”

He searches desperately in Hannibal’s eyes for something, anything—condemnation, judgement, hatred. He almost wants to find it, wants Hannibal to hate him as much as he

hates himself. But he sees nothing, just as he always sees nothing in Hannibal's eyes.

"I don't know what to do," he whispers. "What do I do?"

"You have to rest, and heal," Hannibal says, reaching out. His hand comes to rest on Will's face, warm and comforting and familiar. "You're horribly injured, Will. There will be a time and place to discuss this, to move forward from this. But it is not now, nor is it here."

"But—"

"Shh." He reaches down, and a second later something cold presses against the seam of his lips. His mouth opens involuntarily and then something bitter and hot is sliding down his throat, burning ever so slightly. He coughs, his eyes welling up, and Hannibal swipes a careful thumb across his bottom lip as it bubbles back up.

"A tisane made with herbal infusions," he murmurs, still gently holding Will's face in his hands. "It will soothe the pain."

"Hannibal," he says distantly. It's as if all the panic and horror of the last few hours has rushed upon him all at once, a riptide that sweeps him savagely off his feet and into a fathomless unknown where he knows he will surely drown. Darkness starts to bleed into the corners of his vision, blotting everything with shadows.

"Sleep, Will," Hannibal's voice says softly, and it's the last thing he hears before everything fades and the darkness carries him away.

My dear Will,

I am sorry I could not be there when you woke. My work demanded my presence, and I had no choice but to leave. I did not wish to wake you, for you were sleeping too soundly, and you need to get as much rest as you can. Emiliano and Winston are both fine, if not somewhat shaken. They, much like myself, wish only to see you recovered.

My house is your house; please make yourself at home. You may come and go as you please, but I advise you to regain your strength until your wounds heal entirely. I have made breakfast and coffee, which are in the kitchen, and laid out a spare set of clothes should you wish to take a shower. I will try to return as soon as I can, but until then I must entreat you not to worry about what happened last night. You are not at fault for it, and you did nothing wrong. I offered you my help, and I will do everything in my power to ensure no harm befalls you.

Yours,
Hannibal

Will's eyes skip over the letter for the fourth or fifth time, lingering on a few words here and there—*My house is your house. I offered you my help. You did nothing wrong. Yours, Hannibal. Yours.*

He sighs, tucking the slip of paper into his pocket and running his fingers through his damp hair. He had decided to take a shower, and he'd had to avert his eyes from his reflection as he had stripped; he has more bruise than skin, and the cuts and gashes that mar his body are still livid and raw. The shower had hurt, making his whole body sting and burn, but it had felt good to get rid of the last of the grime and wash the blood and muck from his hair.

He hadn't eaten much. His stomach still feels as though it's tying itself up in knots, a constant thrum of anxiety fizzing in his blood and making him almost lightheaded. He tries not to linger on any of the thoughts cramming up the inside of his skull, knowing that if he does then everything will come crumbling down like the sand before the sea.

Hannibal's apartment is vast, a cavernous space curated as meticulously as an art gallery or a museum, each and every painting and statue and antique piece positioned careful and perfect. He finds himself wandering, fingers trailing over books in the shelves lining the walls and the polished surfaces of tables, over the gilt-edged frames of the paintings on the walls.

His bedroom door is unlocked, and Will pushes it open with his fingertips. He had woken in the morning in what he had assumed is one of many guest rooms, well-decorated but ultimately impersonal. White silk sheets and burgundy curtains, matching carpets and an empty cupboard in the corner.

Hannibal's is anything but; the moment he steps inside it's as if his every sense has been suffused with him. He's everywhere, from the scarlet satin bedsheets to the massive closet filled with his signature three-piece suits to the scent of him hanging in the air. Books are stacked neatly on the bedside table, textbooks and travelogues and novels alike, and there's a massive reproduction of Bouguereau's *Dante and Virgil* hanging on the wall, directly opposite the foot of the bed.

Will steps up in front of it, tilting his head back to take in every brutal detail. If it were anyone but Hannibal then he would find it strange, odd even, that they would choose to have this painting be the last thing they see before they close their eyes every night. But it seems to fit in this room, in the life of the man who it belongs to. He never was interested in conformity. Or subtlety, for that matter.

He moves towards the bed, sitting and running a hand along the smooth satin bedcovers. The fabric is like liquid beneath his fingers, frictionless and silky, and they smell like Hannibal. He slides a hand underneath the pillow, unsurprised when he feels something cached beneath, hard and smooth against his fingertips. He draws it out, bringing it into the light.

It's Hannibal's sketchbook, the one he had been drawing in when Will had first met him beneath *Primavera*. The charcoal pencil is tucked between the pages near the end, and when he allows it to fall open what he sees pushes the air out of his lungs in a single, sudden rush.

It's a sketch of him, likely from last night; he's lying in Hannibal's bathtub, head tilted back against the copper edge behind him and an arm propped in front of him, his fingers curled limply and his eyes closed. Cuts and bruises decorate almost every inch of skin he can see, and there are smears of blood on the bathtub's pristine surface.

He flips the page over and sees himself again, this one also from last night. He's crouched in a corner, glass panes rising above him and a grimy floor spreading beneath him, eyes half-closed and blood streaking his face. His expression is wild, agonized. This is how Hannibal must have found him in the phone booth, delirious and incoherent with pain and shock—but in Hannibal's eyes he is rendered transcendent, exquisite, otherworldly. Beautiful.

Page upon page is filled with sketches of him from last night, bloody and bruised and his face twisted with pain. The revelation is a gradual but startled one, and when it settles like sediment in his bones it feels like a weight he had already anticipated taking, almost comfortable in the way it slips onto him.

Hannibal *likes* seeing him in pain. He enjoys watching him when he's bloody and aching and raw, like he's a priceless work of art. Something to venerate and preserve and immortalize, something to admire.

The sketchbook slumps forward in his limp fingers and as it lists onto his knees a sheet of paper slips from between the pages, fluttering to the floor where it lies, facedown. Will picks it up, turning it over, and feels his brows draw together as he beholds what it is.

It's a sheet from the case file of Il Mostro's victim, the man they had found weeks ago displayed as *Saturn Devouring His Son*. His eyes skip over the printed information, not quite realizing why it's here of all places, tucked into Hannibal's sketchbook—and then he sees it.

Victim had a dog, it reads. *Went missing a week before his body was discovered.*

And beside the text is a picture of Winston.

When the pieces come together slow but sure the realization hits him like a physical thing somewhere between his ribs, knocking the breath out of him. The sketchbook slips from his fingers and hits the floor, its pages rustling, but he barely registers it; his head seems full of white noise and a faint, high-pitched ringing that blocks everything else out.

The alleyway, the sound of a cold, cold voice and the sheer menace in that one single step. The body they had found a week later. The sketches of Chloris and Zephyrus and Will. The

anonymous tip that had brought Paolo to his apartment. The emptiness in his eyes. The art. The wine. The *food*.

He can hear the sound of his own breathing, impossibly loud in the sudden icy stillness that he's plunged into. He whips around, looking over his shoulder because for a split second he's sure that he's there, that he knows Will knows, the hapless hare that's wandered trusting and docile into the lair of the beast—but there's nobody there.

How could he have been so *blind*?

He drags shaking fingers through his hair, his heart hammering. He has time and the advantage of surprise on his side. He has to think of something, has to come up with some sort of plan. He can't lie his way out of this; Hannibal will know, and then there really will be nothing he can do.

Making up his mind he picks the sketchbook up and tucks the paper back into it, his hands still shaking. Then he turns and leaves Hannibal's bedroom, leaving the door open behind him.

"Will?"

Hannibal steps into his apartment, allowing the door to fall shut behind him softly. It had been unlocked, just as he had left it, but he still feels faintly unsettled. As if there is something on the other side that is not the way he had left it.

He gets only silence in reply, and feels the same quiet sense of unsettlement grow as he moves forward, seeking and finding only emptiness. There is something about the particular stillness of the air and a faint, lingering scent—bright, sour, settling heavy in his lungs when he breathes it in. The smell of epiphany.

Will knows.

He stops in his tracks, feeling a sudden, enormous regret that almost surprises him with its weight across his shoulders, as if he were Atlas kneeling with the sky crushing him beneath it. He rarely indulges in paltry sentiments like regret, but it is thrust upon him now, and caught unawares as he is, all he can do is bear it.

He had been coming to care for Will, more than he had anticipated. He supposes he will have to content himself with tearing open his chest, reaching between his ribs with reverent bare hands to cup his heart between his fingers. Cutting open his skull and consuming that miraculous thing that rests inside it that might have been the only thing in this world that could possibly have understood him.

Will's things are gone as he had expected, but lying across the pillows is something he had not expected to see—his sketchbook, lying open on a page near the beginning. Curious, he steps forward.

It's his sketch of himself and Will as Zephyrus and Chloris, the one he had shown Will in the gallery all those weeks ago. Beside it on the coverlet is the sheet of paper he had taken from the case file in Will's bag, the one last crucial piece of evidence that had given him away. Slowly, he picks it up.

Understanding arrives on swift wings, Will's message deciphering itself within moments. He knows exactly what he is asking, and where he will be waiting.

Freeing the paper, Hannibal allows it to fall from his fingers. He's locked the door and is halfway down the steps before it can even hit the floor.

When Hannibal arrives at the gallery, the sun is setting.

It's crowded, and he can't help but wish that it weren't. The halls are alive with the sound of murmurs and footsteps, and the air is full to choking with the scent of them. The familiar room that houses the *Primavera* is no different; tourists and locals alike are milling around, standing in front of the painting and hovering around the hall like unwelcome ghosts.

Will is sitting on the bench before it, his back straight and his curls spilling around his head like a dark halo. Not for the first time Hannibal is struck by his beauty, his delicate build and devastating countenance. Michelangelo's *David* brought to life.

He approaches slowly, sitting carefully beside him. Will makes no move to acknowledge him, face tilted up towards the painting. Bruises and cuts still mar his skin, blossoming across his throat and peeking out from beneath the collar of his shirt and cuffs.

They sit in silence for a long, long time. The crowds come and go, passing in his periphery like specters, and neither of them pay them any heed. The seconds stretch into minutes, and still they say nothing. Finally after what feels to Hannibal like twenty lifetimes, Will speaks.

"I need to tell you two things, Hannibal," he says. "I don't want you to interrupt me or say anything to me. I've thought long and hard what to say to you, and I need you to let me speak."

Hannibal says nothing, conceding with his silence.

Will lets out a breath, still looking at the painting. "I think I've known for a while," he says. His voice is soft, casual, inscrutable. He could be talking about the weather, or the price of focaccia. "I think I knew it the moment I saw you here all those weeks ago, beside me on the bench. I knew, and I saw. I saw, but I didn't want to."

He swallows. "I wanted to be blind to what you are," he says. "I wanted to, because after one conversation with you, just one single conversation, I knew—I knew that you were the best thing that had happened to me since my dad died. You still are."

The words feel like physical things on his skin, stinging like blades. He has never known himself not to have words, but for once they seem to have deserted him. Even if he wished to, he would have nothing to say.

"Before I even met you, I felt like I knew you," Will goes on. "I felt like I understood you. And then I did meet you, and you understood me, too, and it was… it was like I had been seeing things in black and white my whole life and then you arrived and suddenly there was color everywhere, and it was bright and brutal and beautiful, and I didn't quite know what to do with it."

He closes his eyes, hands clenching into fists on the bench. "I think about you all the time. *All the time*, Hannibal," he says, his voice wretched. "I think about your eyes and your hands and your mouth, about what you're doing and who you're meeting and what you feel when you kill someone."

He drags in a shaky breath. "I think about what you think about when you think about killing. When you cut into someone and take their organs away because they don't deserve them. I think about you—all of you, everything about you. I thought about you long before I ever even met you. That's the first thing."

He lapses into silence after that, one that stretches even longer than the last. All Hannibal can do is look at the painting, his eyes roving over every brushstroke and every detail but not

really seeing any of it at all. They sit quietly for minutes that weigh heavy with words both said and unsaid.

“And the second?” Hannibal asks at last, so quietly even he barely hears the words.

Will pulls in a deep breath as if to steel himself. Then he says, “The second is that I’m falling in love with you.”

Hannibal goes still.

“I think I’m falling in love with you,” Will goes on, “and it should scare me. It should scare me to death. But it doesn’t. I’m not afraid of this, and I’m not afraid of you.”

He ducks his head, exhaling a humorless laugh. “I’m on this case, Hannibal. I’m on the case to find you and you’ve… you’ve put me on the edge of a double-edged sword. But I know that even if I spend the rest of my life looking, I’ll never find someone like you ever again. I’m just as alone as you are. And we’re both alone, without each other.”

Finally he turns his head and looks at Hannibal, and he hardly dares even to breathe. “I’m not going to go to the police,” Will says. “I’m not going to tell Jack. But I have conditions.”

“Anything,” Hannibal says immediately, and Will’s smile is a humorless twist of his lips.

“I know what you did,” he says. “What you made me do. I’m no more at fault for what happened than if I had been coerced. I know you have him with you, that you went back and took him after you drugged me last night. I want you to claim him as yours. Make it obvious. Tear him open, take his organs, do whatever you want with him. I won’t say anything to anyone.”

He swallows hard, and then he adds softly, “I’ll join you at the table afterwards, if you’ll have me.”

Oh.

Oh, he *knows*. He knows, and he doesn’t care, and it’s like a bolt of electricity shocks through his system. Will knows, and he understands. He accepts. He feels no differently because of it. Something hopeless and painful twists hard in his chest like the blade of a knife. It’s deep and savage and excruciating, and he thinks perhaps Will is not the only one falling in love after all.

It takes him a moment to find his voice. When he finally does, all he can say is, “As you wish, dear Will.”

Will dips his chin, then turns back to the painting. Hannibal does the same, feeling strangely disarmed. He has been robbed of his words, of his guard and his advantages, and yet in the absence of it all he feels only a strange kind of contentment.

They sit in silence before the painting long after the crowd ebbs and the moon is high in the night sky. And when Will reaches out across the scant space between them to take his hand, Hannibal reaches back.

Chapter End Notes

Non sei mai stato le Gallerie Degli Uffizi, Investigatore?: Have you never been to the Uffizi Gallery, Detective? (personally extending a formal apology to all italians for this likely horrendous translation but i can't speak italian and google translate is the best i can do.)

well. this chapter certainly was something, huh?

Sopra Quelle’ Ossa Morte

Chapter Notes

content warning for canon-typical gore and disturbing imagery.

It’s raining when they find Paolo’s body.

There’s a hush over the crime scene, the crowded space devoid of its usual morbidly curious bustle and activity. There are no questions, no muttered theories and surreptitious passing of olive green and blue lira notes beneath the hems of jackets and coats. There’s just a stunned sort of silence, settled over the whole place like a thick, suffocating shroud.

He smells it before he even sees it—masking the scent of blood and rot and festering flesh, overpowering even the ozone and petrichor of the rain as it comes gently but no less ceaselessly down from the heavens.

Saccharine. Sharp. Fresh and light, not unlike the wind that catches the bouquets he sets on the balcony in his apartment and sweeps gently over the curtains and books, making pages rustle and fabric sway, tinged with the sweet smell of spring.

“Looks like Il Mostro was in an amorous mood last night,” Jack says with little humor, his face unreadable as he looks at what remains of Detective Paolo’s body.

Because the entirety of it is garlanded with flowers.

His chest has been sliced open with immaculate precision, slit wide from his collarbones down till his navel. The cavity inside has been entirely hollowed out, every organ removed carefully and placed in a woven basket set in front of his kneeling form. And in the cavern where they had been blooms a riot of blossoms, bunch upon bunch of them, all of them the exact shade of Will’s eyes.

A wreath woven from luscious red roses wreathes his hair, its thorns clinging to his scalp and digging into his flesh in a taunting caricature of a crown. Lines of red have dried halfway down his face, dripping down his cheeks like tears. The stab wound in his neck has been filled with roses as well, a reverent caress of downy petals on the ugly gaping gash.

White cotton is draped over Paolo’s shoulder in a facsimile of a toga, folded and falling in elegant pleats down his arm. Clutched in his hand is a glass chalice filled to the brim with thick, viscous scarlet liquid. A jug sits beside the basket filled with his organs, and Will doesn’t have to look inside to know that it, too, is full of his drained blood.

“Bacchus,” he murmurs, unable to tear his eyes away from the bloody love letter before him. “Caravaggio.”

“This doesn’t look like the other kills,” Jack says as Will walks forward, strangely mesmerized by the vivid beauty of the flowers against the brutality of the wounds they fill. “He doesn’t usually take the time to… decorate this much.”

“No,” Will agrees, crouching beside the body. His eyes catch and linger on the roses spilling from the stab wound in his neck, each blossom plump and dew-spangled and perfect where they’re nestled into rent flesh and torn skin. “This one is different.”

“Why the flowers?” Jack asks with a frown. “They’re all over him, roses and—”

“Sweet Williams,” Will says softly, standing.

“They must mean something,” Jack says. “I don’t think Il Mostro does anything frivolously, not even something like this.”

Will says nothing, slowly circling the body. He hadn’t seen Hannibal do this, hadn’t asked when he had done it. It must have taken him hours of painstaking work, weaving each and every blossom carefully between Paolo’s ribs and wreathing them on his brow, on his neck. Their creamy, delicate petals are entirely free of blood, still crisp and fragrant where they bloom incongruously inside the rotting corpse.

Will can feel him almost overwhelmingly against his own consciousness, unmistakable and irrefutable. He wonders, as his eyes skip over the reverent mutilations carved into his flesh, how he hadn’t realized before. He’s all over it, all over every horribly beautiful crime scene Will has visited.

He’s all over Will, too. In his head and underneath his skin, in his marrow and in the space where his synapses meet. He fills Will’s lungs when he breathes, and he knows that if he takes a knife and slices his chest open he’ll find him there too, between his ribs and in the blood that will spill onto the ground. In the surety of his destruction.

“Will,” Jack’s voice says. “You ready?”

He doesn’t take his eyes off the body. “I need to be alone,” he says. *Alone with him, alone with myself. Alone with us and what we’ve done.*

He doesn’t see Jack leave but he feels it once he’s gone, like a faint indentation in the air where he had been and breathed. Left alone with the insurmountable weight of what lies before him Will exhales, finally allowing himself to close his eyes and feel the pendulum swing back and back and backward again.

When he opens his eyes he’s on the ground, gravel embedded in his skin and the taste of blood fresh and coppery in his mouth. A shadow stretches spindly and impossibly tall on the wall above him, his gun cocked and poised to shoot, and there’s a knife in his hands.

It happens too quickly; the blade of the knife sinking easily, readily even, into the skin at Paolo’s neck as if eager to sever his nerves, slice through his veins and spill his blood. Watching him reach upward as if in slow motion, fingers encircling the hilt and pulling it out

in a spray of blood, watching it gush out of the wound with every frenzied, sluggish beat of his fading heart.

Watching him stumble and fall with a terrible finality, watching him twitch and then go still, blood turned black by the night spreading around his body like a pool of pitch. Feeling the sick, heady rush of power and righteous satisfaction that crests over him in the wake of the realization—*He's dead, and it's because of me.*

But he knows now, that that is not entirely true.

He looks down at his hands, and they are not his own.

Long, elegant-boned fingers flex on the handle of the scalpel he's holding, tapering at the joints and sharp-knuckled, smooth skin stretched taut over the jutting bones at the crowns of his fists. They're still and steady, trained not to tremble even the barest fraction of an inch to either side. Smooth, broad palms and neat, short-trimmed nails. An artist's hands, a pianist's hands, a surgeon's hands.

There's a deceptive strength in those hands, strength that lends itself to the task at hand; hauling the dead man up and prying the knife from his fingers, positioning him to perfection before cutting him open and emptying him out. He knows exactly where each and every organ will be, knows how to reach into the incision and cut it out economical and precise.

It's bloody, grueling work, but he is patient. And he enjoys this, the aesthetic necessity of it all in the Machiavellian sense; the death and mutilation are necessary, acceptable even, since it will be elevated to something far more beautiful in the end. Art is worth a thousand dismembered corpses.

And this is a gift. He is loath to call it a *favor*, a word so entirely detached and impersonal as to be almost casual. No, this is not a favor. It is a labor of love, a silent plea, a promise and a secret whispered into the infinite confines of the shared space of their minds. It is his penance, and it will be the beginning of a becoming.

"I want my adoration to be felt, want it to be tangible and apparent in every flower I weave into this display," he says, and the voice that comes from his mouth is both his and not. "The exultant realization that I am seen, that I am known, will show itself in every petal and every thorn, every careful brushstroke of my masterpiece. This is my design."

He closes his eyes, *their* eyes, feeling the surety of his next words anchoring itself into his bones, feeling himself and Hannibal inseparable, inextricable, indissoluble. Both of them conjoined, both of them incomplete without the other. Two halves of some monstrous whole whose becoming would make even God shudder in disgust and delight.

"This is our design," he says.

His eyes open, the world swimming back into focus gradually. He feels as though he's waking up from a deep sleep, memory coming back slow and awareness coming back slower as he gets his bearings. It takes him a few moments to ascertain whether his thoughts are his own, whether what he's seeing and feeling belong to him.

“Will?”

He jumps, turning quickly towards Jack, who’s approaching with a frown. “You okay?”

“I’m—” He swallows hard. “Yeah, I’m okay. I just needed a minute.”

“So?” He jerks his head towards Paolo’s garlanded corpse. “What’s the deal with this?”

“He’s in love.” The words tumble from his lips almost against his will, and he frowns, amending, “Or, he’s starting to fall in love. This is a… gesture of good faith. An act of service.”

Jack arches a brow. “In love? Can he even feel love?”

“Yes,” Will says, and winces when the word comes out sharp and defensive. “He can. I can feel it.”

“Huh.” Jack turns back to the corpse. “Is this anything like the body from all those weeks ago, the one you said he did for someone else?”

“A little,” Will says. “This is more blatant; he’s revealed himself a little more, hence the… adornments.”

“So why him?” He nods at Paolo. “Why kill a detective? Is he taunting us?”

“Paolo found him,” Will says. “He found Il Mostro, but he couldn’t live to tell the tale. He paid the ultimate price.”

“Something doesn’t feel right,” Jack murmurs, kneeling by the body. His eyes are fixed on the hole in Paolo’s neck, roses spilling out of the clean wound. “He doesn’t usually kill like this.”

“It could have been self-defense,” Will says, looking away. “Paolo has training. He wouldn’t have been as easy to subdue as some of the other victims.”

“Maybe,” Jack says. “I don’t know. It feels… off.”

He sighs, standing. “The Questura is going to be all over this. The victim is one of theirs, and they’re not going to forget this quickly or quietly. It’ll be personal now.”

“It was always personal,” says another voice, and he and Jack turn in unison. Pazzi is ducking under the bright yellow tape that sections off the crime scene, his face set in grave lines. “He has evaded us for so long, and he is difficult to catch despite the scale of his displays and the nature of his mutilations. Many wish to see him caught solely because he has danced out of reach so skillfully.”

He steps up to the body, turning his head to look at Will as he does. His eyes linger on the fading bruises on his face, his expression unreadable. Will had done his best to cover up the worst of his injuries underneath his coat and scarf, but there had been little he could do about the remnants of the fight that linger on his cheeks and jaw.

“Rough night?” is all Pazzi asks.

“I fell down some stairs.”

He raises a brow but says nothing, turning back to the body. “He had been missing for two days before they found him. He did not tell me or anyone where he was going; he got a call at the station and simply left.”

“Looks like he got some information,” Jack says. “He went after it, got a little too close.”

“So it would seem.” He turns to Will. “There will be an inquiry at the station, and a general desire to see this case closed as quickly as possible.”

There should be something—guilt, shame, fear. A blade twisting into his stomach, into his lungs, making it difficult to breathe. But he feels only a cool sort of conviction as he looks back at Pazzi, and a surety that feels at odds with everything that had happened, everything he had done. “I know.”

“You did not heed my advice,” he says, stepping closer, his voice dropping. “I told you to stay away from him.”

“And I told you you’re wrong about him.” He doesn’t back down, turning his head to look back at Pazzi. “You still are. What makes you think he has anything to do with any of this?”

“I could not—” He looks away. “I do not have to tell you. You and I, we do not make claims. We do not guess, do not think. We intuit, we know. And I know this.”

“Go ahead, then.” Will smiles, entirely humorless. “Search his apartment. Tear it apart looking. Launch an investigation against him.”

“Perhaps I will.”

“Good luck with that.” He turns away. “We both know how it’ll end, Detective. You’re not going to find anything.”

“Because it is not him, or because he eats the evidence?”

Will shakes his head. “I know you want to catch him, and I’m sorry you lost your partner in the crossfire. But there’s a difference between intuition and blind accusation, and if you keep this up then you’ll keep losing.”

“Maybe.” Pazzi shrugs. “Or maybe I was wrong about you as well, Signor Graham.”

“Maybe you were.” He starts to turn away. “Good luck with your investigation, Detective.”

Pazzi says nothing, but Will feels his eyes following him as he walks away, ducking under the police tape and sliding into the passenger seat of Jack’s car. The ride back is short and tense, and for the second time Will finds himself being ushered into Jack’s office, perched awkwardly on the single rickety chair opposite the desk as he flips through the case file.

“So what do you think?” Jack asks, tapping one of the sheets. “Is he getting clearer now? Do you feel any closer to catching him?”

“I—”

The phone on the desk rings with a sharp trill, mercifully saving him the ordeal of answering. Jack frowns, reaching over and lifting it to his ear. “Crawford.”

His expression doesn’t change as whoever is on the other end speaks—a faint buzz to Will’s ears—but he sounds equal parts amused and irritated when he says, “I’m at work, you know.”

Another, more prolonged buzz.

Jack’s eyes find Will. “Yeah, he’s with me. And I’m not going to—”

There’s a louder buzz and Jack rolls his eyes. “That is none of your business. This is an active investigation, and has absolutely nothing to do with you.”

A few seconds and a veritable storm of buzzing later he sighs again, then holds the phone out to Will. “Take it.”

“What?” He eyes it warily. “Who is it?”

“Just take it.”

He does, trepidation unspooling in his stomach as he lifts it to his ear, expecting the Chief Investigator at the Questura or perhaps another police officer, maybe even one of the forensics at the crime scene who found his DNA on Paolo’s wounds—

“Hello?” a woman’s voice on the other end says. “Is this Will Graham?”

“Yes?” he says uncertainly.

“Hi, Will.” Her voice is warm, rich with amusement. “I’m Bella Crawford, Jack’s wife.”

“Oh.” He blinks, slightly taken aback, and looks at Jack. He only shrugs, shaking his head with a grimace. “Um, what can I do for you, Mrs. Crawford?”

“Please, just Bella. I heard you’ve been working with my husband on a case.”

“Yeah,” he says. “It’s been a few weeks now.”

“Well, as per usual, it looks like he’s let his pursuit of his work get in the way of basic courtesy,” she says. “I know he’s never going to ask, so I wanted to know if you were free sometime this weekend to have dinner at our place.”

“You really don’t have to take the trouble to—”

“Nonsense,” she says smoothly. “I insist. You’ve been doing so much, it’s the least we can do. Jack agrees, even though he’d rather cut off his own hand than admit it.”

He feels his mouth tilt into a smile almost involuntarily. “I think I’m starting to get that. Thank you, I’ll be there.”

“Great,” she says, and he can hear the laughter in her voice. “I’ll see you then, Will. Have a good day.”

There’s a *click* as the call disconnects and he hands the phone back to Jack, whose brows are raised. “Well?”

“Your wife just invited me over for dinner,” Will says.

Jack shakes his head, but there’s bemusement beginning to etch itself into the upward curve of his smile. “Yeah, I figured. She’s been after me all weekend, saying I have to and that I don’t have basic human decency.”

Will cracks a smile. “She did mention something along those lines.”

“Yeah, well.” He shuffles the papers on his desk. “We can’t all afford to be good Samaritans. You can head home for today, Will, I think we’re pretty much done here. Don’t worry about there being an inquiry into the detective’s death, I’ll make sure they don’t hound you.”

“Thanks.” He stands, making to leave Jack’s office, and as he shuts the door behind him he feels the beginnings of something bitter and hot gnawing steadily at his insides. It swells uncomfortably with every step he takes, and he realizes as he steps out into the midmorning rain that it’s the first time he’s felt guilt for everything he had done.

“For the hundredth time, I am fine,” Emiliano says with a huff, batting Will’s fluttering hands away. “I got pushed over, not shot in the head.”

“You don’t know how scared I was when I saw you lying on the floor bleeding,” Will mutters, still fussing a little at the cut on his temple, mostly healed now. “You’re not as spry as you think, Emiliano.”

“Well, I am fine.” He wiggles his fingers at Will. “See? All functional. Nothing is missing.”

“Something seems to be missing,” Will says, and earns a gentle swat on the side of the head for it. He ducks away, laughing, and Emiliano’s smile fades a moment later.

“You are the one who must be worried about,” he says, reaching out and placing a careful hand on the side of his face. “You still have not told me everything that happened that night.”

“I did.” He shuts his eyes. “He ran off after he hit me, Emiliano. He’s gone now.”

“If Hannibal had not come—”

“Well, he did. So there’s nothing to worry about now.” He opens his eyes, stepping back. “It’s done. Nothing happened, and there’s nothing to worry about.”

“You are too flippant, Guglielmo.”

“And you are fretting too much.”

“Who else will fret?” He gently pats Will’s cheek. “Sometimes I feel I am the only one who worries about you.”

“Me too,” Will says with a rueful smile, and Emiliano amends, “Though maybe I am not the only one. Not anymore.”

He raises an eyebrow at Will pointedly when he says nothing. “How long has it been since you last spoke to him?”

Will turns away to avoid answering, sitting cross-legged on the floor and putting his hands out. Winston stands and pads over happily from where he had been curled in the corner of the living room, draping himself across his lap. He buries his fingers into his russet fur, giving him a generous rub.

“A few days,” he says finally, evasively.

“Are you fighting?”

“No,” he says distractedly, scratching behind Winston’s ears. “No, not really.”

“There is a distance between you two,” Emiliano deduces, and Will stays quiet, still not meeting his eyes. Emiliano makes a quiet noise of understanding and he scowls at Winston’s ears, unwilling to meet his far-too perspicacious gaze.

It’s been a week since they had found Paolo’s body, and he hasn’t heard from Hannibal since. There hasn’t been a single phone call or letter or anything at all, and the sudden silence is disconcerting, strange almost. He had gone to the gallery almost every day looking, but the bench in front of *Primavera* is always empty.

He’s stepped out of class and let his eyes sweep along the pillars that line the entrance more than once, hoping and half-expecting to see him standing there, all wind-teased chestnut hair

and effortless long limbs leaning against the old buttery stone, eyes sparkling and mouth tilted up into that little smile—but he's never there.

He knows Hannibal now. Better than he's ever known anyone, better than he knows himself. He knows he's keeping his distance on purpose, that he thinks by some misplaced sense of chivalry and righteousness that Will doesn't want to be around him, that he needs space after everything that had happened.

But Will had risked everything that day at the gallery, staked everything he had on a gamble of love for him. He had thrown away morality and righteousness and everything that mattered to him, just for the slimmest of chances that Hannibal would have him. He doesn't want *space*. If anything, he wants the exact opposite.

"I will not pry," Emiliano says, reaching down to pat his shoulder. "But I think perhaps you should seek him out."

Will gives a noncommittal hum.

"He seems like a boy of grand gestures," Emiliano goes on. "Do something nice for him. Make him dinner. Comb that unruly mop on your head and wear something nice, go to his apartment to surprise him."

"Emiliano," Will sighs. "It's not as simple as that. He might not even be there, and I don't know if he'll appreciate it. He's not the kind of person who likes surprises, or disruptions to his routine. I can't just doll myself up and show up at his apartment to make dinner."

Emiliano tilts his head, smiling a little. "Can't you?"

"No."

"Well, it would certainly be a sight to behold," Emiliano says. "I know I would not be able to resist."

"Oh, God." Will puts his head down onto Winston's back, getting a face full of soft fur. "Enough. Please."

"You must try it sometime," Emiliano goes on, undeterred. "It will work, I know it."

"I'm going to bed," Will says, standing and scooping Winston up. "I'll see you in the morning."

"My kitchen sink is acting strange," he says as Will makes to leave, and he half-turns in the doorway as best as he can while holding several armfuls of sleepy dog.

"I'll come by before dinner," he says. "You'd better make something really worthwhile."

"He catches himself a man who can cook and suddenly he doubts my cooking," Emiliano says, mock-affronted, and Will makes a face at him before turning, Emiliano's laughter following him up the stairs. He stops at the landing, where the building's single, ancient phone hangs from the wall, the red plastic cracked and faded from years of neglect.

He sets Winston down, who immediately vanishes into his apartment, then pauses to consider the phone. He's tried to call Hannibal before; he hadn't picked up even once, and, irritated, Will hadn't bothered to leave any messages, knowing Hannibal would check his answering machine obsessively for any sign of him and wanting to leave him hanging.

Slowly, he reaches out and picks the phone up, punching in Hannibal's number and leaning against the wall, waiting with the phone held to his ear. The line rings and rings and rings with no answer, predictably—only this time instead of hanging up, he waits a few moments longer, allowing the automated voice to instruct him to leave a message.

He hears a short *beep*, then silence. He stalls for a moment and then two, weighing the words that occur to him and then dismissing them. Finally he shuts his eyes with a sigh, winding the spiral cord around his finger.

"I got your gift last week, Hannibal," he says, his voice low. "Don't you want to know what I thought of it?"

He pauses again and lets the silence stretch on and on, lets nothing but the sound of his breaths fill the emptiness. He can see Hannibal in his head, leaning against the table by the fire with his eyes closed, hanging onto every word, every pause, every little sound he makes.

"I thought it was beautiful." He twists the cord tighter. "The sweet Williams were a little on the nose, though. So were the roses. Nobody there understood what you were trying to say but me. I know it was the same with the body of Winston's last owner too, the man in the alleyway. You killed him and left him there for me."

He remembers realizing it, remembers the shiver of gratification and satisfaction and pleasure that had rolled over him when he did. He can still see it behind his closed eyes; the horrible beauty, the raw devotion.

"I closed my eyes and time reversed, and I saw you. I saw myself, too. I was right; we are conjoined. Neither of us is complete without the other."

He sighs, leaning his head against the peeling wallpaper. "I have to stand there and lie, lie that I don't know you and that I'm doing everything I can to catch you. But I've caught you already, haven't I?"

There's words of goodbye on his tongue, bittersweet and cloying like rotting fruit. There's sharp words and soft ones, pointed words and flat ones—but when he opens his mouth all that comes out is, "I can't stop thinking about you."

He swallows hard, and it's abnormally loud in the stillness. "And I know you can't stop thinking about me, too."

In a sudden, savage movement he wrenches the phone away from his ear and slams it back into the receiver, quickly turning on his heel and away from the phone. He shuts his door behind him and locks it with a click, resolving not to pick the phone up if he gets any calls.

He hears a knock at his door, echoing infinitely like ripples across the surface of a lake. He looks to his right where Hannibal is seated at the head of the table, a plate full of food and a glass full of blood placed in front of him. He only glances sideways at Will and says, "Aren't you going to see who it is?"

Will stands up, his chair scraping back with a screech like nails on a chalkboard. There's a feast set across the long table: a pair of mangled bodies, faces bloodied beyond recognition and their bodies cut open and emptied out. Blood runs fresh and slick from their wounds in rivulets of crimson, dripping off the legs of the table and gathering in viscous puddles on the floor.

He walks to the door, leaving bloody footprints behind him, and opens it. Lying on the other side is a beautiful bouquet of freshly picked roses and sweet Williams, their spicy-sweet fragrance rising to meet him. Carefully, he bends down and picks them up.

He walks back to the table and Hannibal asks, "Do you like it?"

His hands feel slippery. He looks down at the flowers and sees that they're not flowers at all; he's holding a bouquet of severed hands, clutching the wilting stalks of bloody roses in their clenched fists. He considers them for a moment, carefully.

"It's beautiful," he says finally.

Hannibal smiles, his eyes glinting the same color as the liquid in his glass. "Taste is housed in the parts of the mind that precede pity," he says as Will sits, still clutching the grisly bouquet. "Pity has no place at the table."

Green stalks rise up from the twin caverns inside the bodies laid out on the table, their heads weighed down with bulbs. They burst open even as he watches, creamy blue-throated flowers unfurling in a riot of color. Roses cascade from the wounds in their necks, red as blood. The sick-sweet scent of them is like acid hanging in the air, thick and choking. It burns when he breathes, like acrid smoke filling his lungs.

“For you,” Hannibal tells him. “I did all this for you, Will.”

“I know,” Will says, and he smiles again.

“What’s for dinner?” Will asks.

He blinks and suddenly Hannibal is behind him, his shadow swallowing Will’s whole where they shift on the surface of the table and a butcher’s knife in his fist. The sharp edge nicks his skin, a cold, stinging kiss against the pulsing vein in his neck. His other hand threads lovingly into Will’s hair, pulling his head back to expose his throat.

“Never ask,” he purrs, and smiles adoringly as he slits Will’s throat. “It spoils the surprise.”

“So, Will,” Bella says, looking at him above the rim of her wineglass. “How long have you lived in Florence?”

He sets his fork down with a clink. “A little over three years now. I came here for college.”

“Three years,” she repeats, raising a brow. There’s a mirthful glimmer in her dark eyes. She’s startlingly beautiful, and she makes it surprisingly easy to talk to her as though he’s known her for years and not mere minutes. “How’s your Italian?”

“Non è male,” he allows, picking up his glass of wine. “Yours?”

She laughs. “It’s still a work in progress,” she says. “And I’ve been here ten years.”

“And as usual she talks herself down to our level,” Jack says, arriving from the kitchen with another bottle of wine. Their house is a quaint nook on a street corner, hanging precariously over the main road and stretching up two rickety floors. The inside is an affair of wood and stone and colored glass, and everything is hand-painted in warm shades of brown and orange and dark blue.

He sets the wine on the table. “Her Italian is flawless. Every local we’ve ever met thinks she’s been living here her whole life.”

“That is not true!” She’s laughing, pushing her hair out of her face. “I still stumble here and there on the occasional phrase.”

“Sure.” His voice is teasing but his gaze shifts when he looks at her, softening into something almost like adoration. Will thinks he knows now, whose photo sits polished and in pride of place on his desk at work.

“It’s hard not to miss home in a place like this,” she goes on, leaning back. “Sometimes you just want to eat a terrible burger that’ll shear two years off your life and dip your fries in a strawberry shake.”

“I still can’t believe you do that,” Jack says after a pause. “It’s a miracle we stayed married after I saw you do it for the first time.”

Bella rolls her eyes. “So, Will,” she says, turning to him, “you’re studying criminal psychology?”

“I’m trying to,” he says, and she smiles. “So what are you doing to help the police out for this case?”

“I… interpret the evidence,” he says. “Everything available at a crime scene, I put it together and I interpret it.”

“A profiler,” she deduces, raising a brow. “Well, go ahead then.”

“What?”

“I imagine we’ve got plenty of evidence lying around,” she says, gesturing. “Interpret away.”

“Okay.” He glances around, taking everything in; the desks and tables and books he can see, the careful carelessness of the space around him. The jacket thrown over the back of the chair with a familiar symbol stitched across the pocket in the corner of the living room and the badge hanging from a peg on the wall, the seal on the loose sheets of paper he had seen on the desk coming in. The photos perched on shelves and hanging from the walls and the books stacked on top.

“You’re with the Navy,” he guesses. “That’s how the two of you met.”

She lifts her glass of wine, glancing at Jack. “He is good.”

“I told you.” He glances appraisingly at Will, then stands with a sigh, starting to clear away the now-empty plates. It had been a simple but no less hearty meal, breads and cheeses and rice.

“Everything was great,” Will says, and Jack glances at him, an amused glint in his eye. “If it’s compliments to the chef you want to give, that would be me,” he says.

Bella shrugs self-deprecatingly as he raises a brow, taking a sip of wine. “I can’t cook to save my life, it’s true,” she says. “Come on, we should get out of the way.”

He finds himself standing beside her by a roaring fireplace, the writhing flames casting pulsating shadows across the little room they’re in. Bookshelves line the walls, and he spots everything from novels to autobiographies to textbooks.

“He probably doesn’t show it much, but he believes in you,” Bella says after a brief silence. “A hell of a lot more than he believes in anything else, himself included. He says you’re the best student he’s ever taught, and that you’re going to be the one who catches this guy.”

Will looks away, fingers clenching into fists in his pockets. “He might be alone in thinking that.”

“I know profiling and working with the police for these kinds of things can be… heavy,” Bella says haltingly. “How are you holding up?”

“Not great,” he admits, scuffing the tip of a shoe against the carpet. “Getting into killers’ heads, and especially a killer like this one… it’s not easy on me.”

“No, I don’t imagine it is,” she says. “Are you seeing a therapist?”

“No,” he sighs. “I probably should.”

“You definitely should.” She reaches for the crystal decanter full of dark gold liquid sitting atop the mantel, loosening the cork with a clink and pouring herself a few fingers. “I’ve seen people in my line of work who do what you do, field agents and soldiers and profilers. Without a life raft to cling to, doing work like this, you go unmoored.”

“I didn’t think it would be this hard,” he confesses. “I thought it’d be… easy. I could do it all my life, doing it to actually find a killer didn’t seem like that much of a leap.”

She smiles. “Guess you were wrong, huh?”

“Jack said he wouldn’t let me get too close,” he says. “Because I can get too close. It’s a two-way street, and sometimes I… let them in, too. And I don’t know what would happen if I let Il Mostro into my head like I’m letting myself into his.”

“You’d fight it,” she says. “Fight him, and take yourself back. There’s an odd kind of strength in you, and I don’t think you’re the type to break that easy.”

“I hope so,” is all he says, his throat tight.

“You’re a good man, Will,” she says after a pause. “And you’re good for my husband. I think you give him hope. He doesn’t get that very often, but he deserves it.”

She sighs, swirling the remaining dregs of smoky amber liquid around in her glass. “He’s a better man than he thinks he is,” she goes on. “And he deserves more than he thinks he does. Certainly more than he gives himself.”

“I know,” Will says quietly.

She drains her glass, barely wincing as she lowers it again. Her eyes are impossibly dark and intense, twin coals a mere breath away from kindling. There’s a laden silence between them for a moment, and all he can hear is the gentle crackle of the fire and the distant sound of running water and clinking china coming from the kitchen.

Finally Bella says, “Promise me something, Will.”

“What?”

“When the time comes,” she says, speaking slowly and as if she were choosing her words very carefully, “make sure he… make sure he lets go. Make sure he knows when to.”

“I will,” he says, though he isn’t entirely sure what she means. She just nods, placing her glass on the mantle with the clink of crystal. “Good. Thank you.”

There’s a particularly loud crash of pots from the kitchen and Bella winces, pulling away from the fireplace. “Sounds like I’m going to have to go to the rescue over there,” she says with a smile. Her eyes are warm and clear again, and suddenly it’s as though the last few moments never happened at all.

“Help yourself to a drink, Will,” she says, already beginning to turn away. “We’ll be back in two shakes.”

She disappears around the corner and he hears laughter coming from the kitchen, leaving him alone in the room with nothing but the sound of silence and the feeling of shame and guilt like a pit of venomous vipers writhing in his stomach.

E Con Rabbiosa Fame

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He spends the next few days at home, going downstairs almost every day to perch on Emiliano's kitchen counter or sit cross-legged by his ancient and broken fireplace, tossing out pencils and spoons for Winston to fetch. He heads back to his apartment long after dinner, and looks pointedly away from the phone every time he does.

His nightmares have grown feelers, dark and insidious tentacles that entrap him in the dark the moment he dares to close his eyes. He sees every one of Hannibal's victims, sees Jack and Bella and Emiliano and Pazzi and everyone he's lying to on his dinner table, sees Hannibal smile at him and hand him a plate.

He relives that night over and over again, thrust back into the past and forced to kill Paolo again and again and again, night after night. Forced to feel that sick surge of power and righteous satisfaction at the feeling of the blade sinking into his throat, the pleasure that writhes in his chest at the feeling of his blood spraying onto his skin warm and wet.

Sometimes he sees his dad, smiling a sad little smile at him and holding the broken body of a dead bird, his glasses sitting crooked on his nose like they always did. Will tries every time to talk to him, to say, *Dad, I'm sorry. Dad, I miss you*, but nothing ever comes out of his mouth.

He tells Jack he's ill, knowing that Il Mostro will not leave any displays anytime soon. He barely talks, barely eats, almost never smiles. Emiliano tries to ask him what's wrong and he only shakes his head. He doesn't know if he's made the right choices, doesn't know if he's a good person for it.

It turns cold and crisp as the edge of a blade outside, the sun weakening with every passing day. He sits on his balcony every evening and feels the wind like razors stinging his cheeks, watches the sun sink slow and inevitable beneath the domes and steeples and shingles of the city, and counts yet another day wasted.

It's been forever and no time at all when he looks beside him on his balcony one evening and sees one of the many bouquets Hannibal had sent him that he had forgotten to throw out, wilted and dead in the corner of the little space. He stares instead at it as the sun goes down, and forgets that time to count the days.

The next evening he roots through his cupboard for a half-decent shirt and trousers, running a comb through his hair and grabbing his coat before he locks his apartment. He picks up a few ingredients from Emiliano's house before leaving, and tells him that in case Will doesn't come home that night, there's nothing to worry about.

The moon is already rising by the time Hannibal arrives back home, weariness leaden in his bones with every step he takes up the steps to the door. It had been a demanding day, and he can feel the evidence of long hours standing underneath the stark surgical lights in the stiffness of his fingers and the faint ache behind his eyes.

He can feel the evidence of the other task he had undertaken as well; the faint, lingering scent of blood that still clings to the pores of his skin and the cold weight of the scalpel still tucked underneath his sleeve, the cuts of meat wrapped neatly in his bag.

His door is unlocked, the knob spinning loosely in his hand when he goes to open it. Thoughts of thieves and lockpickers vanish as quickly as they had come when he catches the faint scent in the air and on the doorknob, still evident: dog fur and dust, mint and coffee. He breathes it in deep, feeling it settling heady and sweet and familiar in his lungs.

Will.

He pushes the door open, caution evident in every chary movement as he steps inside and allows it to fall shut behind him. A veritable onslaught near-overwhelms his senses the moment it does, smells and sounds snaking through the air and reaching him where he stands by the door. Butter and basil and spice, the sizzle and sputter of the stove, faint strains of music—all coming from the kitchen.

Predictably Will is making dinner, standing at the stove when Hannibal walks in. He's barefoot and jacketless, the first few buttons of his shirt undone and his curling hair frizzing gently in the humidity. He's thrown a few windows open to dispel it and it lets the cold night air into his apartment, tinged with the smell of cigarette smoke and exhaust and the sharp tang of oncoming rain.

The music is unfamiliar—something modern, the soft purr of synths and drums spilling from the gramophone. A stack of worn, slightly faded records is piled beside it, clearly selections of Will's own that he had brought with him. He smells of acrid pique and discontentment, the scent of it so strong that it overpowers even that of the food.

He spares Hannibal but a single curt glance before turning his attention back to the contents of the gently bubbling pot on the stove, his every movement brusque and irritable. His demeanor doesn't change, but Hannibal knows that one brief look had been enough; he knows exactly where Hannibal had just been, what he had just done, what lies wrapped neatly in brown paper in his bag.

Hannibal swallows thickly. Being seen is a strange, vulnerating thing, rendering him flayed open with every one of his defenses stripped away. He had spent far too long clinging to those defenses, fortifying them until they were all but impenetrable. To allow Will past them had felt akin to allowing him to slip a blade past every chink in his armor, piercing what he had guarded so fiercely since that day in the cold, barren flatlands of his ancestral home, bitter grief like ash in the back of his throat and the taste of his sister's flesh caught between his teeth.

He had never loved anyone as he had loved Mischa. A love that transcends morality and control, prediction and forgiveness. He had thought he never would, nor had he wanted to. He had resigned himself long ago to a life of courtesy and shallow pleasures, knowing with a grim sort of certainty that he would never find an equal with whom he could truly be seen, and understood, and accepted.

And so here he stands, at a loss in the face of that very love whose absence he had contented himself with. And what a love it is; fierce and savage and remorseless, *possessive* in the demands it makes of him. He feels almost helpless, stunned into immobility by the sheer presence of it.

He sounds almost tentative to his own ears when he speaks. "What's for dinner?"

Will stiffens slightly, the tense line of his shoulders tautening further as he turns to Hannibal. Instead of answering he holds out a hand, curling his fingers upward in an impatient gesture. "Give me the meat," is all he says, and his voice is sharp.

Silently, Hannibal reaches into his bag and draws out the cuts of meat he had taken from the bodies earlier that evening, handing them to Will. He takes them without a word or so much as another glance upward, looking back at the counter. A moment later he's turning back towards Hannibal, holding out a glass of glimmering wine.

"Go sit down," he says, jerking his head towards the living room. His eyes are oceans of enigma, dark and endless and entirely unknowable to him. "The food will be ready soon."

All he can do in the face of the riptide is take the glass and retreat, withdrawing and sitting by the guttering fireplace. To give his restless and overwrought hands something to do he crouches by the grate, slowly coaxing the flames back to life till they leap upward in tongues of blue and gold. They cast stark, pulsing shadows over the room and he welcomes the warmth that rolls over him in waves in their wake, thawing the remnants of the evening chill that still cling to his skin.

He's nearly finished with his wine by the time he hears the clink of china and glass from the dining room, along with gentle thuds of metal on wood as Will sets the table. Not quite

knowing what to do with himself he lingers, a ghost in the doorway of his own house unsure of whether or not it is welcome.

“Hannibal,” Will’s voice calls. He appears in the doorway a moment later, his face just as unreadable as his tone. With all his perspicacity and intuition Hannibal still cannot read him, cannot guess what he is thinking or feeling. He’s a closed-off fort, its moat entirely uncrossable and its walls entirely unscalable.

“Dinner is ready,” he says, stepping back and away. “Sit.”

Wordlessly Hannibal takes his seat at the far end of the table, setting his glass down. Will is still moving, his face still closed off as he takes one of Hannibal’s many fine bone china bowls and ladles a generous amount of still-steaming ribollita into it. He sets it down forcefully in front of Hannibal with a loud clatter, and he nearly winces at the sound.

“Eat,” Will says shortly.

He draws away, taking his place in the seat opposite him as Hannibal reaches out, picking up the spoon beside his bowl. The soup is hearty and thick, full of beans and vegetables and minced meat that melts on his tongue. It stings the inside of his mouth with a welcome heat, leaving behind the pleasant aftertaste of butter and basil.

“It’s delicious,” he says honestly.

Will glances up, his own spoon clinking gently against the rim of his bowl. “It’s Emiliano’s recipe. I used to make a simpler version of this with just broth and leftover vegetables on days when there was nothing else.”

“And was that often?”

“Often enough,” Will says, looking away, his voice clipped and curt. Deciding it may be wisest not to speak Hannibal allows the silence that comes afterward to stretch on, cold and brittle as a film of ice clinging to the surface of a lake. One misstep and it will shatter, coming apart beneath his feet and sending him plunging into the icy depths.

He watches Will eat in the edge of his periphery, watches him lift each spoonful to his lips and the movement of his slender throat as he swallows. Food he had made in Hannibal’s kitchen using the meat he had brought him, *knowing* where he had brought it from. An ache of something helpless and utterly wretched seizes inside him, near-painful in its intensity.

They’ve been eating in chafing silence for several long minutes when Will throws his spoon down with a sudden movement, sending it clattering to the floor with the loud rattle of silver against marble. Hannibal glances up and he’s looking back, a smoldering intensity in his eyes that makes it difficult to meet it outright.

“What were you going to do?” he asks abruptly. “If I never found out, what would you have done?”

“I—”

“Were you going to eat me?”

Hannibal sighs, setting his own spoon down carefully. He sees no point to dishonesty, nor does he wish to lie to Will. “Eventually, yes.”

He’s still looking at Hannibal steadily, his gaze as unwavering as his voice. “How?”

“I would have eaten your heart,” Hannibal says. “And I would have cut open your skull, then eaten your brain.”

“How?” he presses.

“As raw as I could.”

Brilliant blue eyes narrow into crescents. “And the rest of me?”

“I would not display you,” he says, and despite everything it sounds like an oath, whispered intimate and binding into the scant space between just the two of them. “I would try to honor every bit of you, keep as much of you inside of me for as long as I could. But I would never allow any other’s eyes to see your body. Nobody would see you in death except for me.”

Will leans back in his chair, his expression inscrutable. “But I did find out.”

“You did,” he says. “And I am all the more grateful for it, for I did not have to.”

There’s a brief silence. “I never didn’t accept… what you are,” Will says finally, haltingly. “Even before I knew, I understood. I know how alone you are, Hannibal.”

“I know.”

“And I never didn’t love you for it.” His expression doesn’t so much as flicker; he’s still holding Hannibal’s gaze with a firmness he knows is singular, one that he knows only he has the privilege of being on the other end of. The words are like shrapnel piercing his skin, burrowing beneath muscle and sinew to reach the rawest parts of him. The parts that bleed the easiest.

He swallows hard. “I know.”

“Then why?” His eyes are unusually bright in the candlelight. “Why the silence and the not returning my calls or answering my letters?”

He hesitates. “I did not wish to impose myself upon you after all the difficulty your realization brought on you. I thought it would be… safer for you if I were to withdraw for a few days, so as not to arouse any suspicion.”

“No.” He’s smiling a little now, a wry, humorless twist of his mouth. “Sometimes there is no other choice, but I prefer sins of omission to outright lies, Hannibal. Don’t lie to me.”

“Then you know why.”

“I do,” he says, and the admission is a mere tilt of his head, sure and insouciant and *arrogant*. The movement bares the hollows of his throat and collarbone and Hannibal is seized by the sudden and animalistic urge to sink his teeth into the exposed skin there until it bleeds, until the coppery taste of it floods his tongue. “But I want to hear you say it.”

“It would please you to see me vulnerable, then?”

“Immensely.” He arches a brow. “Indulge me.”

Pride and vexation war in his chest, neither gaining the upper hand. They remain locked in an uncomfortable stalemate as he meets Will’s unwavering eyes and says, “I was afraid.”

Will’s little smile widens. “Go on.”

Beautiful, cruel boy. “I was not sure that you wanted anything more to do with me after… everything. You are righteous to a fault, and I did not know if there was a place for me in your life.”

“And I told you in the gallery that none of that matters to me.” He shakes his head. “I told you I was willing to—”

“One cannot simply shelve an instinct so innate with a simple wave of the hand,” Hannibal counters. “I knew there was a part of you that wished to turn me in, see me dead for my crimes. There still is.”

“I—” Will looks away, his cheeks flushing. “That’s not—”

“There is guilt there as well, for the lies you are forced to tell to people you have come to care for,” he says. “I have demanded that you go against your better nature, and that is a taxing thing. I wished to allow you to realize it on your own terms, and act as you saw fit afterward.”

“‘Act as I saw fit afterward’?” he echoes, and he sounds incredulous. “You thought I was going to—you *expected* me to—leave you? To turn you in?”

“I would not begrudge you if you did.”

“You—” Within moments Will’s disbelieving expression dissolves, turning to one of anger. “After everything I said, after all the calls and letters and waiting for you to reply, you still think—”

“It is entirely possible that you would feel differently after you give it more thought,” Hannibal says equably, attempting ineffectually to placate him; with every word Will appears instead to grow even angrier, his fingers curling into fists on the table’s edge.

“That is giving me zero credit for any of this,” he snaps. “I had a hand in all this too, this isn’t something that just happened to me, Hannibal. *You* didn’t just happen to me. I made these decisions; I made these choices. No matter what, we would have ended up here.”

“I don’t wish to hurt you,” Hannibal says. “That’s all I—”

In a sudden, startling movement Will stands, sending his chair skittering backward forcefully. His eyes flash a dark, tempestuous blue, an ocean churned by the wind into a restless maelstrom. He pulls his arm back and before Hannibal can even draw in a breath to call out he sweeps it forward in a single ferocious movement, sending every last dish crashing to the floor in a deafening, explosive starburst of broken china and spilled wine.

The sound of it rings in his ears, echoing and discordant. Stunned into silence all Hannibal can do is stare as, still glaring at him, Will places both palms flat on the table and slowly, carefully levers himself onto the bare wood on one knee.

His hardly has time to suck in a startled breath before Will is upon him, on his knees before him on the table with a hand reaching out to fist into the collar of his shirt in a bruising grip. His other hand clenches on the back of Hannibal's chair and then he's dragging him forward and up—and then he's kissing him.

Instinct and reflex spur his body into motion before his mind can meet it, half-lifting himself up in his chair and reaching for Will with no other thought but to bring him closer. It's a hard, violent onslaught, not so much a kiss as it is a clash of tongues and teeth and lips, of pleasure and pain. Rough and ungentle as the sea crashing against a sheer cliff, softening and eroding the unyielding stone slow but sure.

He tastes of wine and butter and tart rancor and it floods his senses when his lips part underneath the bruising pressure of it, relish curling low in his stomach as Will's tongue licks into his mouth. He yields without resistance, merely sliding a hand into Will's curls and opening himself up, allowing himself to be searched and tasted and taken.

They break apart slow and unhurried, neither of them entirely willing. Will is still kneeling on the table, the position placing their eyes on a level. Will's are wide and dark, black moons reflecting his own face back to him. His lips are rosy and swollen from kisses and Hannibal finds himself unable to resist swiping a gentle thumb along the Cupid's-bow, marveling at how far he has fallen, at how little he cares.

"There," Will murmurs. "That's better. You're not talking now."

The words startle a laugh out of him. "Was that your end?"

"Partly." His hands slide down, fingers hooking into the belt loops of Hannibal's slacks and giving a sharp tug to pull their bodies flush against each other. "I've wanted to kiss you since the day we rescued Winston."

"And I you since the day we met."

A smirk tugs at Will's lips. "You've been patient."

"I can be," he allows, "though I am finding it difficult as of this moment."

"Then don't be." He leans forward, pressing an openmouthed kiss to his jaw, and the slow, hot swipe of his tongue makes goosebumps break out over his skin. His hands come to rest

on Will's hips, fingers twisting into the fabric of his shirt to curb the instinct to tip him backwards and pin him against the dining table.

"I'm not going to turn you in," Will whispers against the pulse in Hannibal's throat, swallowing down his racing heartbeat. "I'm not going to leave. And I'm not going to break like a fragile little teacup if you're not careful with me. So don't be. I don't want you to be."

He breathes out a harsh exhale into Will's hair, his head tipping backward as his eyes close. His voice is ragged when he speaks. "As you wish, *tesoro mio*."

"Well then." Will draws away, one of his hands braced on Hannibal's chest with his fingers forming a cage directly over his heart. His gaze is steady, but Hannibal can see the pulse in his throat fluttering wildly. "Aren't you going to ask to take me to bed?"

He has to take a moment to catch his breath, to use what little is left of his willpower to rein in his composure and the tattered remains of his self-control. Then he swallows hard and says roughly, "Will, would you come to bed with me?"

Will begins to smile.

He has imagined often what Will might look like bathed in blood.

It would be striking against the pallor of his skin, a bright garish crimson, making his eyes leap out bright and clear. He thinks about what it might look like staining his teeth, dripping down his chin and slicking his slender hands. How they would stain everything he touches in smears of viscous scarlet, leaving bloody fingerprints behind.

He gets a taste of it now, his eyes devouring the sight of Will's body outlined against the rich bloodred satin of his coverlets. He had chosen them well; just as he had envisioned, on his back beneath Hannibal he looks as though he is lying in a pool of blood.

The illusion will have to be enough, for now. He intends to see it through to the end, his dreams of blood turned black underneath moonlight and Will beside him, watching him and

reveling in the glory of his becoming. The triumphant conductor of a macabre orchestra, one that plays death and horror to his every whim. *Someday.*

He feels Will's fingers tangle in his hair and then he's drawing Hannibal down over him, their bodies aligning chest to chest. His eyes are impossibly wide and dark in the dimness, glittering pools of liquefied sin enticing him with the promise of destruction.

Their lips meet in an openmouthed kiss and then he's drowning in sweet dark heat and hands roving over the unfamiliar topography of each other's bare skin with all the care and wonder of discovery, fingers tracing reverent paths over dips and curves and edges for the first time. His Will is delicate in his spare beauty but he's still strong and hard in places Hannibal is least expecting it; the ridges of his stomach and the corded muscle of his throat, the unyielding curve of his thighs.

He's beginning already to learn the particular science of his intimacy, noting the spike in his pulse when Hannibal nips at his tongue and the soft moan he breathes into his ear when he kisses a particularly sensitive part of his neck. He flushes and trembles and tenses so perfectly, an instrument tuned to perfection by a maestro who knows exactly what to touch to bring forth the sweetest music.

He presses a line of bruising kisses down the column of Will's throat, hearing his quiet sighs of pleasure as his fingers bury themselves into his hair. His mouth comes to rest directly above his hammering heart, feeling the erratic rhythm of his pulse against his lips through bone and sinew and skin. His skin is smooth and unmarked, the flawless alabaster expanse of his throat and chest begging to be bitten and bruised, marked and claimed.

He allows his teeth to close over the spot and Will groans, his fingers twisting harder into Hannibal's hair but not pulling him off. The understanding that he likes to be bitten follows swiftly afterward and the realization is an exultant one, impelling him to leave a trail of reddening marks across his chest, the indents of his teeth standing out dark and evident. He knows it will have to be enough even as he longs to tear his chest open, reach between his ribs to hold the wild thing they had been caging in his hands.

Will's fingers tighten in his hair and then he's tugging his head up and dragging him forward, their lips crashing together with a barely-contained force. Will lets him go far too soon, both breathing hard in the negligible space between their mouths.

"Cupboard," he says, his voice hoarse. "Second drawer."

He feels a frown tug at his mouth but Will merely arches an expectant eyebrow, glancing at the cupboard beside the bed. Leaning towards it Hannibal opens the second drawer and draws out what was inside, and his eyes take a moment to adjust in the dimness.

The jar of unscented lubricant is small, about the size of his index finger, and unopened. He glances at Will as he holds it out, who merely shrugs artlessly.

"One of us had to be prepared," is all he says, taking the jar.

"You planned this, then?"

“I anticipated it,” Will corrects him. He glances down at the jar and then up again, eyes glittering. “Will you, or do you want to watch?”

Slowly, Hannibal reaches out and takes the bottle.

The lubricant is thick but light on his skin, cool to the touch but not cold. He starts with a tentative finger, careful not to allow impatience to override caution. The sound of Will’s ragged breathing is all he can hear in the otherwise still air, filling his ears.

The moments trickle by, sweet and sticky as honey. Within minutes he has Will writhing on three fingers, feeling the irresistible heat of him pulling at him like a silken fist. The scent of him rises up to meet Hannibal, musky and masculine and tinged with potent arousal and impatience.

“I got your message last week, Will.” He shifts closer, thrusting his fingers in deeper and stretching Will open further. He gasps, sweat gleaming on his forehead and in the hollows of his throat, his cheeks flushing.

“I know you did,” he says, his voice ragged. “I know you waited every day for me to leave one, sitting by the fire and watching the phone ring when I called.”

He raises his head and he has the nerve to *smile* at him, teeth bared in a rictus grin of malicious satisfaction. “You memorized every word, didn’t you?” he asks breathlessly. “You heard my voice in your head for days afterward, every time you closed your eyes at night.”

“Isn’t that why you left it?” He leans down over him and Will arches up willingly to meet his mouth, all harsh breaths and teeth scraping as his hands tangle in Hannibal’s hair. “You knew what you were doing, what you were risking.”

“I didn’t care,” he says, the words coming out on the heels of a low hiss. His breath hitches, and they dissolve into a breathless moan as Hannibal’s fingers find his prostate, angling his wrist carefully to brush deliberately against it with every push of his fingers.

“Careless,” Hannibal says, “and reckless, to say what you said knowing it was entirely possible the *polizia* could have tapped your phone and were listening in. You could well have given us away.”

“You’re careful enough for the both of us,” Will says, and then suddenly Hannibal is flat on his back with Will straddling his hips, face flushed and eyes bright, the marks Hannibal’s teeth had left scattered on his skin already beginning to darken into bruises. He wears them like jewels around his throat, priceless and precious.

He braces both his hands on Hannibal’s chest, breathing hard. His gaze is like a physical thing dragging over him, raking down Hannibal’s body offered up beneath him as if on an altar, reverent and devotional, given up entirely to him. All of him, every last inch of him, belongs to Will, and he knows—he *knows*, because he knows Hannibal, knows him better than he knows himself.

He reaches out then, a hand following his eyes and moving slow and hot over Hannibal's skin. He leans down, his breath even hotter, and he cannot stop the gooseflesh that breaks out in its wake in an involuntary reaction. He may have denounced his species long ago but his body is still human, still trembles and flushes and betrays his mind, fallible and mortal.

"I'm not interested in taming you," Will says, his teeth sinking into each word and turning them to bitten-off snarls, wild and dangerous and *beautiful*. Feverishly hot hands slide up his chest, nails dragging over his skin. He wonders if Will can feel his heart hammering beneath his fingers, wonders if he knows it belongs unequivocally to him and him alone. "I'm not interested in caging you. They all want to catch you, but I won't let them. I won't let anyone have you but me."

His fingers wrap around Hannibal's throat, hard enough to make the breath rush out of his lungs. A teasing warning, a reminder that Hannibal's life is in Will's hands, that Hannibal is the one who had given it to him. It is his now, to do with as he pleases.

"You're not Florence's monster, Hannibal," he says softly, leaning down. Their lips brush, and the words are breathed out against his mouth like a threat, like a secret, like a promise. "You're mine."

He leans back, his fingers unclenching from around Hannibal's throat. He gasps in a reflexive breath, and their eyes meet just as Will lifts himself up, taking Hannibal inside him in one smooth movement.

He hears himself curse, his head falling back against the pillows at the suddenness of it, the near-overwhelming pleasure that sends a shock up his spine. His hands reach out involuntarily, coming to rest on Will's hips in a bruising grip to anchor himself, tether himself to earth lest he go entirely unmoored.

He's still looking unwaveringly at Hannibal, panting with sweat shining on his skin and making him shimmer. The moment seems to stretch out, interminable and immeasurable. Everything else fades, every other feeling but this one, every other thought but that every last barrier between them has been shattered at last.

The vulnerable line of Will's throat moves as he swallows hard. His fingers tighten convulsively into fists where they're still braced on Hannibal's chest and then he's moving, every slow, deliberate rock of his hips sending searing waves of molten pleasure rolling through him like the ebb and flow of the tide.

Slender, strong fingers twist into his hair, tugging his head up with a sharp jerk and baring his throat to the fangs of the beast. He leans down, sets them to the pulse fluttering wildly there, hard and bruising. The pain is a delicious thing and he drinks it in like a man dying of thirst, feeling it slide sweet and silky down his throat like ambrosia.

Will shifts above him, color rising to his cheeks with the exertion as he angles his hips, taking him in deeper. His hands move to grip Will's hips tighter but he doesn't allow it, lacing his fingers with Hannibal's and pinning his wrists to the mattress above him. All he can do is tip his head back and let him, let him take everything, reason and consequence receding to a mere smudge on some faraway, distant horizon.

They both come apart at the same time, the world fracturing to shards of crystal around him. It's Will's name on his tongue when he does, sweeter than sugar and more searing than fire, the axis mundi around which his entire universe revolves. Everything else ceases to be; he is here, and he is Will's, and there is nothing else.

When the unspooled threads of his consciousness slowly begin to knit themselves back together again they're lying side by side, breath coming back slow and awareness coming back slower. The air is cool on his sweat and spend-slicked skin and he can feel the heat of Will's body beside him, the backs of their fingers brushing ever so slightly. And for a moment in some hazy, shared golden haven they are simply, purely together.

Eventually the mess they've made compels him to stand and retrieve a damp towel from the bathroom, returning to find Will sitting up and watching him, the sheets pooling around hips. He says nothing as Hannibal wipes them both clean carefully, then sets the towel aside and returns to the bed. Will is still silent, turning his head where he's lying beside him to look at him.

"Will," he begins, and he shakes his head, leaning forward instead to kiss him. He's warm and familiar to the touch already, his fingers where they curl around his jaw a gentle but insistent pressure. For a few long, blissful minutes they do nothing else but trade slow lazy kisses, tongues tangling together and hands languidly reaching for each other's skin.

Eventually they pull apart for breath, and Will blinks out at him with a smile. "That was… nice," he murmurs.

"It was." He shifts closer, their skin pressing together. "Although I feel I must admit to something now."

"Yeah?"

"That night we saw each other in Sant'Ambrogio, the same day we met at the gallery for the first time," he says. "It was not quite a happy coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"You had left your bag at the gallery." His fingers are drawing absentminded circles on the arch of Will's hip, his skin smooth and soft. "I saw one of your books, with your name written in it. After we spoke, I felt that to let you go would be the gravest of mistakes. I knew that even if I searched for a thousand years, I would never find you again."

"You followed me," Will says. "That's how you were there, in the bookshop that day."

"I did. It is not entirely an accident, that everything happened as it did. I could not predict the outcomes of my actions precisely, but…"

"But you knew that somehow or the other, we would end up here." He leans back, looking up at Hannibal. "You *planned* this."

“Not perfectly, I will admit. I wanted to tell you who I am, but I could never entirely predict you.”

“But everything else was your design.”

“Yes.”

Will says nothing, but the slightest of smiles is playing about his mouth as he looks at Hannibal, widening fractionally with every moment that passes. And suddenly Hannibal knows what he is going to say, before he can even draw breath to say it.

“You knew,” he says.

Will merely shrugs. “I knew. I wanted to see how everything would pan out, so I let you. The first time we met I knew too, that you were going to be… a part of my life somehow. Far be it from me to stop you.”

He gazes at Will a moment, full of a strange sort of wonder as he looks at him. “Every time,” he says. “You surprise me every time, *amore mio*.”

“I know.” He leans forward, placing one last soft kiss to his mouth before drawing away and nestling his head onto Hannibal’s chest. He falls asleep within minutes, his breath feathering out onto his skin warm and shallow and even.

He shuts his eyes, allowing conscious thought to fall away as he reaches into his own mind. His memory palace is growing, expanding, already larger than most houses and thrice as grand. He walks through the door, allowing it to fall shut behind him with a resounding clang. The foyer stretches out and upward, marble floors and arched ceilings that are impossibly high, stained-glass windows sending spangled shadows sliding along the walls.

He walks forward, his footsteps echoing in the cavernous space of the chapel. He glances down; the graven skull grins back at him, skeletal hands raised in supplication before a God who is as unforgiving as the time that had stripped the skin from its bones, leaving it bare.

He crosses the foyer and feels the doors close behind him, leaving behind memories of sun-soaked summer afternoons in Paris, the taste of sweet wine and the crack of a cane sending pain blossoming across his skin, beautiful dark slanting eyes widening in horror as she realizes what he is, what he’s done. They dissipate as he walks further into the hall beyond, the mist of the past struck by the harsh, unforgiving golden rays of passing time.

Beyond the foyer of his childhood lies hall upon hall and gallery upon gallery, all impossibly vast and leading into the other in a dizzyingly labyrinthine array, each and every one of them dedicated solely to Will.

He’s been collecting memories these last few weeks, bottling and preserving them like priceless wine. He has everything, from that first meeting at the gallery to the day he had found out who Hannibal was, each one as vivid and rich as the last. Sights and sounds and smells, tastes and touches and desires coming together like dreams. He wants to keep them like this forever, never let them fade no matter how much time goes by.

He allows himself to linger a short while, indulging for just a moment longer before returning to the present, feeling Will’s heartbeat against his own. He turns his face into his curls, pulling in his scent with a long, slow inhale. Sated desire and the heady sweetness of sleep fills his senses and he breathes it in deep, allowing himself to relax into Will’s embrace and close his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

will and hannibal's last exchange is, if it wasn't obvious, inspired by mastermind by taylor swift. that song screamed hannigram to me and i just. i had to.

Dell’ Altissimo Canto

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The shoes are so heartbreakingly small.

Some of them are brightly colored, some of them printed all over with cartoon characters or superhero symbols or Disney princesses. Velcro and rubber soles, lights on the sides that have long since gone dark. Every single one of them is splattered with blood.

He’s holding them in his hands, so many heaped under and over each other that he can’t even count how many. There’s dirt caked on his shirt, on his face, underneath his fingernails. He can hear his own breathing in his ears like a distorted echo, faraway and distant. When he closes his eyes, he can see. He can *see*. And what he sees is so horrible that it tears the inside of his mind, leaving behind mangled wounds that will never truly heal.

He can hear the dog barking. It cuts in and out of focus like a badly tuned radio, layered under and over his panicked breaths like some perverted symphony of terror. He can’t breathe. He can’t see. He can’t—

I’m so sorry, Willy. I wish you hadn’t found out like this—

I love you, don’t make me do this to you. Say you’ll forget. Say you’ll never think about it again and I won’t have to, I promise—

I don’t have a choice. I never did. I love you, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry—

Somewhere deep in the locked tomb of his mind the stream glistens serene and beautiful underneath the gentle glow of the setting sun. The current sweeps savagely through its course, carrying threads of blood with it until they vanish entirely. He will never see it again.

He wakes up reaching for Hannibal across the scant space that had separated them over the course of the night, his wandering fingers seeking and finding only the warmth that clings to the sheets where he had lain.

Slowly, he opens his eyes. All he can see are the faint indents and creases left behind by the shape of him, his scent still hanging in the air faint but unmistakable. Slowly he sits up, still partly asleep as he looks around, the last faint vestiges of his dream dissipating into the dawn of waking consciousness. The room is empty, but he can hear the faint sizzle of the stove coming from the kitchen, along with the smell of eggs and meat and spiced honey.

Spurred out of bed by thoughts of breakfast he looks around, trying and failing to find his clothes. Spotting a neatly folded red sweater on the cupboard by the door he hastily pulls it over his head instead and stops to duck into the bathroom to brush his teeth before he steps out of the room.

The marble floor is cold against his bare feet as he pads towards the kitchen. He can hear the soft, lilting notes of classical piano playing from the gramophone, one of Hannibal's favorites. Mahler, he thinks absently as he draws closer; something he certainly would not have been able to discern from the mere few bars he's heard just a few months ago.

It fills his ears as he steps into the kitchen, rubbing the last remnants of sleep from his eyes. Hannibal is at the counter facing him, deftly tossing eggs up into the air and cracking them open on his spatula before allowing their insides to fall gracefully into the pan before him where they sizzle invitingly, smelling of rosemary and olive oil.

He's dressed in a soft long-sleeved shirt and sweatpants, his hair still rumpled and his sleeves pushed up till his elbows. For some reason Will finds himself oddly transfixed by his forearms, the flexing and contracting cords of his muscles and the way the sunlight turns the soft smattering of hair there to golden down dusting his skin.

He finds himself blushing and averting his eyes, much to his own embarrassment; he's seen Hannibal naked, and yet there's something singularly vulnerable about the smooth, unmarked expanse of the supple exposed skin between his wrists and his elbows, so often covered and hidden. It feels strangely intimate to see him like this, still disheveled from sleep, making breakfast for Will in the kitchen after they spent the night together.

He looks up at Will as he approaches, and the welcoming smile curling his mouth stops halfway, fading into something quieter and subtler. His hands go still, his eyes raking up the length of Will's body with a thinly veiled hunger.

"Morning," Will mumbles, still rubbing at his eyes. "Smells great. What're you cooking?"

As if in answer Hannibal swiftly lowers the flame underneath the pan, stepping out from around the counter. In between one heartbeat and the next he's crowding Will back against the counter behind him, his hands taking hold of Will's hips in a bruising grip and half-lifting him to crush their mouths together.

He melts into the embrace almost instantly, one arm wrapping around Hannibal's shoulders and the other reaching behind his head to grip a fistful of his hair. Unwilling to surrender

control so soon he bites down hard on Hannibal's lower lip, trying to give as good as he gets and wrest control of the kiss. Hannibal groans invitingly, his lips parting. He tastes of toothpaste and coffee and Will chases it, licking greedily into his mouth to gather the relish of it all.

Hannibal's fingers curl underneath the hem of the sweater Will had thrown on, rucking it upward and baring more of his legs to his marauding hands. The edge of the counter is digging painfully into the small of his back but he pays it no heed, aware of nothing else but the warmth of Hannibal's hands and the taste of his mouth.

"Well," Will says as they break apart unhurriedly, neither entirely willing, "that's one way to start the day."

"I cannot find it within myself to apologize for my zeal," Hannibal murmurs, leaning in to steal another swift kiss. "I must admit find myself singularly captivated by the sight of you in nothing but my clothes."

"Possessive," Will chides, fingers twisting harder into Hannibal's hair and giving a gentle tug.

"I can be… covetous, when it comes to that which I treasure and value above all others," Hannibal allows. "And there is nothing I have ever treasured and valued more than you, *cuore mio.*"

He leans in again, his teeth dragging tantalizingly over his jaw. "You look good enough to eat, dear Will."

"Careful," Will murmurs, eyes fluttering shut even as he says it at the feeling of Hannibal's mouth moving lower and lower, down the column of throat and to where the neck of the sweater bares the bruise-smattered skin below his collarbones. The sweet ache of his lips pressing to the already sore skin makes his toes curl on the marble floor, a sigh escaping his parted lips.

His heart skips a beat when Hannibal lowers himself gracefully to his knees, his questing kisses venturing lower and lower still. His fingers push the hem of the sweater upward, and blood rushes swiftly to Will's cheeks.

"Hannibal—" It comes out a mortifyingly breathless whine, his other hand reaching behind him to grip the edge of the counter lest his knees give way. "What about the—the eggs will burn."

"It can wait," Hannibal says roughly, leaning forward, and after that there's no talk for a long time.

“Come with me to the opera tonight,” Hannibal says.

Will frowns at him around his forkful of eggs, trying to gauge whether he’s being serious or not. The eggs are, as he had predicted, delicious, and thankfully not too burnt. He’s found himself staring at Hannibal’s mouth more times than he’d care to admit, however, momentarily entranced by the movement of his jaw and his throat as he swallows each bite.

“The opera?” he echoes finally, skeptical.

Hannibal smiles at his likely dubious expression. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy the show.”

“It’s not the show I’m worried about so much as the rest of the audience.” He takes a sip of steaming espresso from the small ceramic cup Hannibal had handed him. “I don’t think I’d exactly fit in with your high-society friends and colleagues.”

“I’m sure they’ll all be as taken with you as I was.”

He frowns at his eggs. “I don’t know.”

“Allow me to indulge you,” Hannibal implores him gently. “And allow me this indulgence in return.”

“And what indulgence would that be?”

“Showing you off,” Hannibal says without so much as a shred of diffidence. “They’ve caught wind that I’m seeing someone, though until now I’ve been rather vague with any details about you.”

“And now you’d like to confirm or deny all the rumor and gossip,” he guesses, and Hannibal merely shrugs. “Yes.”

“I don’t know,” Will says again. “I don’t… do well in those kinds of social situations. A bunch of rich, influential strangers picking at my scabs doesn’t exactly sound like my idea of

a good time, Hannibal."

"I will be at your side every moment of the evening," Hannibal assures him. "Should things get overwhelming for you, we can leave immediately."

"I don't have anything to wear," Will protests weakly. "I'll only embarrass you."

"Under no circumstance would that ever be possible," Hannibal says, smiling at him. "And I will provide you with appropriate attire, Will. I will take care of everything; all I ask of you is that you accompany me."

He sighs, setting his fork down. "All right, I'll come."

Hannibal beams at him, taking his hand to press a quick kiss to his knuckles. "Excellent. I've already made reservations."

"Of course you have." He can't help the wry smile that tugs at his mouth. "What show is it?"

"*Orfeo ed Euridice*," Hannibal says. "One of the few operas I am yet to experience for the first time."

"And you go to the opera often." It isn't a question, and Hannibal merely gives an artless shrug. "I find it a thought-provoking and inspiring pastime."

"Have you ever thought of using anything you've seen as inspiration for your… hobby?"

"A few times," Hannibal acknowledges. "Though I can do little to recreate the beauty of song and story in flesh and blood."

"I suppose." He takes another sip of coffee. "Just paintings, then."

"Will," Hannibal says after a moment. "Forgive me if it is too soon, but I would ask you something."

"Yeah?"

"In time, and only when you feel comfortable doing so," he says slowly, "would you ever consider… joining me?"

Will looks up sharply, meeting his eyes. He's looking unwaveringly back, and for a few moments they merely stare at each other across the table, neither of them breaking eye contact.

Finally Will says, "I don't… think so. Maybe. I don't know." He runs a hand through his hair, letting out a breath. "God, Hannibal, that's… I don't know what to say."

"I apologize if the question upset you," Hannibal says stiffly. "I was merely curious."

"It's not—" He presses the heels of his hands into his eyes. "It's a lot to ask of me, Hannibal. You've already manipulated me into killing one person."

“But Detective Paolo was not the first person you ever killed.”

Will freezes. “What?”

“I know the look of a man who has killed for the first time, Will.” Hannibal is looking steadily at him, his eyes boring into Will’s. “That night when I found you in the phone booth, when I looked into your face—I did not see it there.”

“I—”

“You called out in your sleep,” Hannibal goes on, gentle but no less demanding. “I heard you call out for—”

“Don’t.” His voice is harsh, as sharp as the crack of a whip. He looks away, his throat working. “I can’t. Not today, Hannibal.”

“Someday?”

He looks down at his half-empty plate, his stomach roiling. “Someday. And when that day comes I have questions of my own for you.”

“Quid pro quo?” Hannibal asks wryly, and Will shrugs. “It’s only fair.”

“So it is.” He pushes his chair back and stands, beginning to clear the table. “Very well, then. Come, I’ll run a bath for you before you go.”

Once he’s clean and dressed in his clothes from last night (which were sitting folded neatly in the bathroom, mysteriously cleaned and pressed without so much as a blemish or a wrinkle) Hannibal walks him out, holding Will’s coat out as he always does as they reach the road.

“I’ve packed some food for Winston as well,” he says as Will threads his arms through the sleeves, allowing Hannibal to pull the coat up over his shoulders and smooth out the creases around the collar. Will turns to face him, glancing down at his pockets before looking up with a brow raised.

“Should I be concerned about what exactly you’ve been feeding him?” he asks. “Or maybe I should say *who* you’ve been feeding him.”

Hannibal only smiles disarmingly, his hands still resting on Will’s shoulders. His thumbs trace slow arcs over the curve of his neck, and Will holds back a shiver. “I’ve merely been broadening his palate, just as I broadened yours.”

“Well, I can’t exactly say he’s been complaining.”

“Nor have you.”

“Yeah, well.” He looks away. “I’ve always played fast and loose with morality.”

“If there even is such a thing.”

He tilts his head. “Isn’t there?”

“There needn’t be.”

Will just smiles at him, taking a step back and allowing Hannibal’s hands to fall away from his shoulders. “I’ll see you tonight, Hannibal.”

“Will,” he hears Hannibal call as he begins to turn away, and looks back just in time to be caught around the waist and spun back into his embrace, their lips meeting a moment later in a chaste, careful kiss. Uncaring that they’re standing in full view of the entire street he lets his hands move of their own volition, one coming to rest on Hannibal’s shoulder and the other on his arm, feeling the gentle swell of his bicep against his fingers that hides his deceptively powerful strength. He’s warm and solid and familiar where Will is caught up against him and the moment stretches out into molasses between them, heavy and slow and sweet.

Hannibal pulls away far too soon, stepping back quickly. Will sees his fingers twitch minutely, a small, involuntary gesture. “Tonight,” he says, and then he’s gone, the door swinging shut behind him.

Will stands there a moment or two, the flush in his face and his mouth cutting the chill of the morning air. He licks his lips; they taste of espresso and Hannibal, and it surprises him how hungry it makes him. Swallowing down the aching swell of it he turns, moving hastily down the street and towards the bus stop.

He’s just turned the corner when he registers that someone is following him.

One too many unsavory encounters before he had found a place to live has honed his reflexes, training him to catch the very edge of a shadow behind him or across the street and note that particular prickle on the back of his neck; the sixth sense that tells you when you’re being watched.

He ducks swiftly into a cramped alley between two houses, allowing the darkness beyond to cast its black cloak around his shoulders and hide him from view. It’s barely been a few seconds when a shadow passes along the mouth of the alleyway, pausing for a brief moment.

It’s enough; he recognizes the figure immediately, his gait and his broad, stocky frame. Forcing down a mixture of relief and anger he allows all pretense to fall away, stepping forward into the light.

“*Buongiorno, Investigatore*,” he says. “Out for a morning stroll in the neighborhood?”

The flash of guilt on Pazzi’s face turns quickly to a look of guarded mistrust, one Will is intimately familiar with now. “I could ask you the same, Signor Graham.”

“Are you stalking me?”

Pazzi scowls at him. “No.”

“Really.” He raises an eyebrow. “So what are you doing here, now? This doesn’t look like your kind of area.”

“It does not look like your kind of area, either. Nor is it.”

“You—” Understanding is quick to dawn, and for a moment it catches him off guard. “You’ve been staking out here,” he realizes. “Watching his house. You’re keeping tabs on him.”

“I was almost expecting you not to come out this morning,” Pazzi says, his eyes flinty and hard. “Last night when I saw you go inside.”

He feels an angry flush spread across his face. “You’re becoming paranoid, Inspector. If you don’t stop, you’re going to get yourself and other people hurt.”

“Is that a threat, Signor Graham?”

“It’s a warning. You saw what happened to your partner. Things don’t end well for people who meddle in places they shouldn’t be, especially where Il Mostro is involved.”

“I want to catch Il Mostro,” Pazzi says. “I want to save the lives of those he would choose to be his victims. It is not I who wishes to hurt people. You understood this, once. You were like me, wanting to uncover the truth. Now, I am not so sure.”

“You and I, we interpret the evidence,” Will says. “Where is the evidence here, Detective?”

“It is a feeling,” he hisses, and there’s venom in the words. “That day in the gallery I saw your Hannibal sitting before the painting, and I *knew*. I could see what he is then, and I see it now. Either you are blind to it, or you have turned a blind eye to it. What you have with him, it is blackmail elevated to the level of love.”

“And which one of us do you think is doing the blackmailing?”

“He is dangerous, Signor Graham.” Pazzi takes a step forward, and he sounds almost frantic now. “If he has coerced you or if—if he is having you do anything against your will so as not to expose his secret, the Questura will protect you. All you have to do is come forward and tell us.”

Will feels a sudden, choking swell of pity like a hand closing around his throat, tightening into a chokehold that cuts off his breath. He isn’t sure if it’s for what he’s already done or what he’s about to do.

“And if I did do that?” He swallows hard, dropping his gaze and looking down and away, bringing fear and guarded hope into his eyes. It’s easy; almost too easy. It’s always there, brimming just underneath the surface of his skin. All he needs to do is let it bleed through. “You’d… hide me?”

Pazzi’s eyes spark, a frenetic kind of energy infusing his gaze. It’s so strong that Will can feel it rolling off of him in waves, drenching him in the feeling of a triumph that is not his. “Yes, we would. All you need to do is tell me—tell us—what you know, or what you think you know. Anything that may give us probable cause to produce a warrant.”

“So you can get into his house?” He allows hope’s wings to unfurl slowly, carefully, allows it to rise in fear’s place. Like shedding a suit and pulling on another. “Find—evidence?”

“Yes!” He nods, sweat shining on his forehead and a chafing, smothering exultation seeping out of every word, every gesture, every pore in his body. “So he has been… holding something over your head? Making you keep his secrets?”

“I—” He glances behind Pazzi, shaking his head. “I can’t. He’ll—”

“I understand.” He lays a hand on Will’s shoulder and it takes every bit of his willpower not to flinch away. *No, you don’t.*

“I will take this to the Inspector at the Questura,” Pazzi goes on. “I will get a warrant, and I will arrest him. Until then stay away, and give him no indication that you have told anything to me.”

He only nods mutely, the picture of a frightened, abused little boy. It isn’t difficult; it’s not that long ago that this was exactly what he had been. Hurt and confused, lonely and lied to by someone he had thought he trusted, someone he loved. Only this time he isn’t allowing it to break him.

“How… how long?” he asks, and Pazzi grimaces. “It may take a few days. I will need to make my case to the Inspector. If you were willing to come and give—”

“No!” He shakes his head, panic bleeding into his voice. “He’ll see. He’ll know. He always knows where I go, where I’ve been.”

“Very well, then. Until I can get a warrant, lie low.” He pats Will’s shoulder awkwardly and the guilt is a vague, pale thing, somewhere in another life. Somewhere before Hannibal. “Thank you for telling me, Signor Graham. I knew that something was wrong, that he may have been coercing you.”

He only nods. “I want to go home now.”

“Yes, of course.” He steps aside, letting Will pass. “Hopefully we will see each other soon, Signor Graham, in circumstances much more favorable than these.”

“Hopefully.” He ducks his head, then turns and moves away, leaving Pazzi behind. He searches inside himself for guilt, remorse, shame, the way he had felt after dinner with Jack and Bella. But all he feels is a burning sort of conviction and the slow, simmering satisfaction of moving his pieces one move closer to a checkmate.

He lets the front door slam shut behind him when he gets home, turning towards the steps and catching sight of Emiliano standing expectantly by the railing, holding an enthusiastically wriggling Winston in his arms. He raises an eyebrow at Will, not quite able to hide his obvious delight.

“You were gone all night,” he says with relish. “And you said you would be gone all night, and I know you went to Hannibal’s house.”

Will sighs, stomping past him and up towards his apartment. “I’m not answering any of your questions.”

“At least tell me which one of you was on top!”

“Absolutely not.”

“You do not have to say much, you know,” Emiliano says, grinning up at him. His eyes catch on the bruises blossoming like violets across his throat that the collar of his shirt fail to hide, on the slight wince to his every step. “God has given me splendid vision.”

Will points down at him. “Not a word.” Then, just before he closes the door he adds, “And for your information, I was on top.”

The last thing he hears before he shuts the door is Emiliano’s raucous laughter and his triumphant crow of, “I knew it!”

The razor drags down the side of his face, leaving stripes of clear, smooth skin in its wake. He winces, trying not to mourn the loss of the pitiful few whiskers that had dusted his cheeks too fiercely, hoping they’ll grow back soon. It’s too late now, anyway.

He had wanted to shave, that day Hannibal had first asked him to lunch all those weeks ago. He hadn’t, then; he had thought the ritual of it was too altering, too intimate. Something you might do for a lover, he remembers thinking.

He always thought he looked like a teenager clean-shaven, but he thinks Hannibal would appreciate it. Not just the outcome but the weight of the gesture itself; he would like that Will would change something about himself, even something as seemingly trivial as this, for him.

Flicking away the last remnants of cream he cups his hands beneath the faucet, splashing water onto his face to rinse off the last of it. It feels colder than usual on his skin, skin that had until now been unexposed. The sensation feels alien, and he stows his discomfort away.

He turns the faucet off and straightens to grab a towel when he catches sight of something move in the mirror behind him, glancing sideways sharply.

Hannibal is leaning against the bathroom doorframe behind him hipshot, insouciant and carelessly beautiful as always; all effortlessly folded long limbs with his hair neatly swept back, dressed head to toe in a suit the exact color of fresh blood.

He smiles as Will spins around, his heart hammering. “Emiliano let me in,” he says.

Will shakes his head, running his fingers through his damp hair. “Of course he did.”

Hannibal unlatches himself from the doorframe, prowling slowly towards Will. He feels absurdly for a moment like a helpless, wounded gazelle watching a lion stalk it slow and sure, his eyes locked on its jaws in anticipation of the inevitable pounce. Though he supposes he needn’t worry about being eaten. Not raw, at any rate.

Long, elegant fingers find the now-smooth line of his jaw, curling gently behind his ears and into his hair. Hannibal’s thumb traces a slow arc across the apple of his cheek, the touch impossibly soft.

“Even angels would fall to their knees and weep at the sight of you,” he murmurs. “All the priceless art in Florence pales in comparison; you put even *David* to shame.”

His little smile widens at the flush that floods Will’s cheeks against his fingers, now all the more visible against the pallor of his skin. “Did you do this for me, Will?”

Swallowing hard past the sudden dryness in his throat, he nods. He feels oddly naked all of a sudden.

“Few eyes will be solely on the performance tonight with you by my side,” he says, then draws away, holding something up in his other hand that Will hadn’t seen earlier—an unmarked bag, one Will doesn’t have to look into to know what’s inside.

“I hope it will be to your liking,” Hannibal says. “And that it will fit you.”

“You know you don’t have to.” A wry smile tugs at his mouth. “You made sure it’d fit me just the way you want it to.”

Hannibal merely gives an artless shrug, though he doesn’t deny it. He holds the bag out to Will. “Aren’t you going to put it on?”

Slowly, he reaches out and takes it.

Setting it down beside him he reaches for the hem of his shirt, slowly pulling it up over his head. He drops it beside him in a crumpled heap, and Hannibal’s eyes move slowly from where it lies on the floor and up the length of his arm to his face, his eyes darkening.

Without looking away from Hannibal he undoes his belt and pushes his slacks down, kicking them away once they fall. He’s standing in front of Hannibal in nothing but his boxers now, and to his credit, Hannibal’s eyes never stray from his face. There’s a familiar hunger stirring

there; coiled up like a serpent waiting to strike, open its mouth impossibly wide and swallow him whole.

He reaches for the tailored trousers first—dark blue, plain at first glance but with the faintest of lighter sheens to it that betrays its quality. It glides up the length of his legs like liquid, clinging just so to the swell of his thighs. As he had thought it fits him perfectly, tailored to Hannibal's keen gaze.

The dress shirt comes next. Crisp and finely woven, the palest of pale blues. He does up the buttons purposefully slow, lingering after sliding each one through its intended slit. He can see Hannibal at the very edge of his periphery, see his tongue dart out to wet his lips and the way his fingers give an involuntary twitch every few seconds the same way they had that morning. As if he were consciously restraining himself.

He knots his tie the way his dad taught him; a simple half Windsor, neither too narrow nor too wide. The fabric is glossy and silken against his fingers, finer than any of the plain cotton ties he's got hanging in his cupboard. It's covered in a subtle pattern of overlapping diamonds, woven into the surface in the same color; only someone standing close to him would be able to make it out.

He reaches up to tighten it and then Hannibal is there, gently swatting Will's hands away. His fingers wrap delicately around the knot as he tugs on the other end, carefully nestling it up into the hollow of Will's throat before folding down the collar. It settles there neatly, a faintly tight but comfortable weight.

Hannibal steps back, eyes sweeping up the length of his body appreciatively before he stoops, carefully drawing out the last piece of clothing in the bag; the dark blue jacket, cut in striking, severe lines that mold to his back and shoulders when Hannibal slides it up his arms. It's light, smooth as silk against his fingers when he rubs the fabric between them. Expensive.

"Do I want to know how much this cost?" he murmurs, eyes still cast down towards where his hand lingers on the hem of the suit.

"It's a gift," Hannibal says, his hands settling on Will's shoulders and turning him gently to face him. They glide down a moment later, carefully fastening the jacket's single button. The movement fits it more snugly against his chest, just shy of tight.

"You've certainly been observant," Will says, fingering the liquid silver of the cuff links that wink at his wrists. He glances back up at Hannibal, raising an eyebrow. "I don't recall ever giving you my measurements."

"I made a few… educated guesses." His hands come to rest on Will's waist, just where the cut of the suit flares, and pulls him closer. He can feel his touch even through the fabric, ten warm lines making goosebumps break out over his skin.

"Good to know that you spend every available moment staring at me," Will says, tilting his head back to look into his face. "Did you get me shoes, too?"

Hannibal smiles. "They're by the front door."

On a sudden, unignorable impulse Will leans up on the tips of his toes, pressing his mouth to Hannibal's. He responds immediately, tilting his head to kiss back, his hands clutching tighter at his waist. Will bites down on the still-healing cut on Hannibal's lower lip, hard enough to make sure it stings but not enough to make it bleed.

Hannibal's low answering groan seems more from pleasure than pain, and the sound travels like a line of heat down his spine, pooling low in his stomach. He draws away the barest fraction of an inch, feeling the erratic rhythm of Hannibal's breaths on his lips.

"Next time," he says, the words growled out against Hannibal's mouth, "I want you to buy *everything* for me. I don't want a single thing that's not you or yours so much as touching any part of me."

He steps backward abruptly and shoves Hannibal away, leaving him flushed and gasping, his hands falling away from Will. "Go get the shoes."

He sees the line of his throat move as he swallows thickly, sees him physically fight to regain his composure before he obeys. Will follows, stepping out into the room and pulling on his socks before reaching for the shoes—black, leather, impossibly finely crafted—when Hannibal stops him with a hand on his arm.

"Allow me," he says.

He draws his hand back and Hannibal sinks to his knees before him, seemingly uncaring about dirtying his own immaculate suit. He cups Will's heel in his fingers oh so gently, carefully sliding the inside of the shoe up his foot. He ties the laces with a perfect knot, pausing for a moment to draw back and flick a microscopic bit of dust off the leather before moving on to the next one.

He repeats the entire process again on his other foot, sitting back on his haunches once he finishes securing the second knot to admire his handiwork. He glances up at Will, his dark eyes glittering, his hands still loosely encircling Will's ankles.

"Beautiful," he says softly. His thumbs trace slow patterns over the backs of Will's ankles, the same place where Achilles was stabbed. The only vulnerable spot on his invulnerable body.

A shiver crawls up his spine. The setting sun settles its dark honeyed fingers adoringly on Hannibal's face where they slip through the window, striping his skin in gold and black like a tiger's. He's just as beautiful, and just as undeniably dangerous. An apex predator hiding his razor-sharp canines and crushing strength beneath a veneer of exotic, inviting beauty.

"We'll be late," Hannibal says finally, rising. He steps away, his fingers lingering for a brief moment on Will's face before he turns to leave. Head still spinning, Will grabs his keys and his coat, then follows.

The champagne is bright and sweet on his tongue, fizzing gently as he swallows it. He catches hints of citrus, sharp and sour; lime blossom, maybe. It tastes expensive.

Strangers dressed in their finest finery are mingling in the cavernous entrance hall of the opera house, all holding the same slender crystal champagne flute clutched in Will's fingers. He wonders as he clings to Hannibal's arm and tries not to hunch his shoulders as Hannibal had murmured to him a few minutes earlier, if they would taste expensive too.

Their high-class, organic, gold leaf-sprinkled diets would certainly show itself in the meat, in undertones of richness and fullness. Untainted by processed food and oil, made cleaner and healthier. Perhaps they'd be a little on the lean side, but he has no doubt that any of the affluent pigs in this room would make for a fine feast.

A few of them have set their sights on the two of them already, their faces lighting up when they catch sight of Hannibal. They all raise their hands and beckon him closer, their lips shaping his name and their eyes latching avariciously onto Will, but Hannibal only smiles politely at them and places a hand low on Will's back, purposefully steering him away.

It confuses him, at first. Every time someone sees the two of them, Hannibal stays in their line of sight for another moment or two, making sure they see both of them before decidedly pulling him in the opposite direction. Then, the third or fourth time it happens, he understands.

He's stoking their curiosity, dangling Will in front of them like the plump, ripe fruit that hangs over Tantalus; something he craves and covets above all else but knows he can never sink his teeth into. And Hannibal won't let them have even the barest of tastes until the show is over.

"At this rate none of your *friends* here will be paying attention to the performance at all," he mutters as Hannibal once again steers him away from a group of waving men and women decked in silk. Their faces fall as the crowd closes behind them, hiding the two of them from view. "They're all talking about us."

“That was precisely my intention,” Hannibal says, a smirk curling his mouth. He looks inordinately pleased with himself, and Will has to bite his lip to keep from smiling as Hannibal tugs him towards the open doors. “Come, let’s take our seats. I booked the best box in the hall.”

The best box in the hall turns out to be an overhanging balcony that juts directly over the primary seating, placing the two of them in full view of the entire hall. He huffs out a laugh as he sits, Hannibal shutting the doors behind them and joining him a moment later.

“You like this, don’t you?” he asks. “Dressing me up and having me hanging off your arm all evening, making sure they all see me but pulling away before they can ask. Showing me off to all these people.”

“You are the most prized of all my possessions, Will,” Hannibal says. His voice is low, and there’s a gleam in his eye that looks almost predatory. “I would have everyone know you are mine, and mine alone. None of them are entitled to know anything about you but that.”

Heat uncurls in his blood, and as he draws a breath to speak the lights begin to dim, casting them both in darkness. He swallows the words, drawing away and sitting back against the velvet seat as the show begins.

He’s never been to an opera before, nor has he ever been particularly fond of the idea of seeing one. He supposes there’s something hauntingly romantic and beautiful about human voices soaring to reach for perfection, about the helpless melancholy of tragedy transcending language and lyric. Even without his empathy he’s certain he would be able to feel it, the crushing inevitability of Orpheus turning to look at his beloved in one final mortal error and the pure grief in his anguished scream as he loses Eurydice not for the first but the second time.

Hannibal is utterly enraptured beside him, every ounce of his considerable focus devoted solely to the stage. There’s raw, naked emotion in his eyes, his usually impenetrable and immovable countenance stripped all the way down to the elegant bones of his face. Above and removed from humankind he may be, but Will thinks that art may be the one thing that brings him back down to earth.

Hannibal turns his head to look at Will and he realizes belatedly that he had been watching Hannibal and not the show—and then he feels his fingers lace with Will’s, bringing their entwined hands up and laying them against his chest, just over his hammering heart.

Perhaps it’s not solely art then that makes of Hannibal Lecter a mortal man, he thinks, and it’s with that quiet realization settling in his bones and the pulsing testament to Hannibal’s humanity thrumming against his fingers that Will looks away and keeps his silence.

“Hannibal! Over here!”

Finally seeming to take pity on his now-ravenous colleagues Hannibal offers the woman who had called out a polite smile and makes his way towards her, his hand still set firmly on Will’s lower back. She’s standing with a sizable group of several others, all staring at him with a thinly veiled curiosity.

“Signora Morelli,” Hannibal says courteously in perfect, unaccented Italian, sketching a short bow. “Did you enjoy the show?”

“Oh, I should be asking you that!” she says with a tinkling laugh, her eyes flicking to Will with every other word. “I could swear you had tears in your eyes.”

“Music is nothing short of magic,” Hannibal says, ducking his head with a small smile. “And I carry great fondness for the Greek myths of old. There is much we can learn from them.”

“Oh, of course!” Her eyes flick to Will again, and she seems unable to contain herself. “But whoever is this charming young man?”

“Will Graham,” Will says, holding a hand out, and her eyes widen as she shakes it.

“Oh, my,” she says. “An American?”

“Only by birth, I assure you,” he tells her in Italian, and her eyes widen even further.

“How charming,” she breathes, her eyes darting over his face. “Your Italian is flawless, my dear!”

“Will is a student of criminal psychology at the university here,” Hannibal says, and there’s a distinctly smug twist to his smile. “He has lived here for nearly four years now.”

“And however did the two of you meet?”

“A chance encounter,” Will says after a brief look exchanged with Hannibal. “In the Uffizi Gallery, underneath Botticelli’s *Primavera.*”

“Oh, how romantic!” She laughs, then looks quickly between the two of them. “Unless—I mean, of course, if you—?”

“We learned rather quickly that we had a great deal in common,” Hannibal says, smiling at her, and the flush across her cheeks deepens.

“So,” she says, turning to Will in a transparent effort to change the subject, “what did you think of the show, young man? Silly of Orpheus, was it not, to turn back at such a crucial moment after being told not to? The folly of man before God indeed!”

“It’s not folly,” he says before he can stop himself. “Orpheus turning to look at Eurydice wasn’t an act of weakness, it was an act of love.”

“Oh? Do go on, Signor Graham.” He has the undivided attention of everyone in the group now, a dozen eyes looking expectantly at him. Swallowing his discomfort, he continues.

“The need to see her—not to look at her but to *see* her, was so profoundly human. Only man, mortal and fallible man, could love with as much abandon so as to do what Orpheus did. He just wanted to see her again, he couldn’t wait even another moment. That—that is love. And the Gods don’t know it, because they don’t know mortality and futility. They will never love with as much passion as we do.”

There’s a brief silence. “What an intelligent young man,” a woman near the back says. “Where have you been hiding him all this time, Hannibal?”

Hannibal merely inclines his head. “There must be some mystery to my life outside the opera,” he says.

“Signor Will Graham?” a voice asks, and startled, Will turns. A young policeman is standing behind him, eyes darting around uncomfortably.

“Yes?”

“I have been sent to you by Jack Crawford,” he says. “Your landlord told me you would be here. There is an emergency. He requests your presence immediately.”

“Have they found another body?”

“Two more.”

“Is it Il Mostro?”

A hushed murmur ripples through the group, and several people exchange looks. The policeman glances at them nervously before nodding.

“Where?” Will asks.

“Just outside the Duomo.”

“I’ll be there,” he says. “Give me a moment.”

Without waiting for an answer he turns away, stepping back towards Hannibal and catching his wrist. He turns to look at Will, and for a moment the concern in his eyes feels real, feels genuine—and then he sees the emptiness beyond. It doesn’t frighten him, doesn’t unsettle him. Instead he’s seized by the sudden urge to lean up and bite at his mouth until he bleeds, until he can taste the coppery tang of Hannibal’s blood on his tongue.

“I have to go,” he says instead, pitching his voice just loud enough for it to be audible to the group hanging onto every word with bated breath. “There’s been another one.”

“Do forgive me for eavesdropping,” one of the men says, eyes darting around, “but I’m quite sure I heard that policeman say something about… about Il Mostro.” His voice drops to a hushed whisper.

“I’m afraid so,” Hannibal says, dropping his own voice to a murmur. “Will has been working with the Questura to catch him.”

Every wide pair of eyes in the group is on him now with barely contained awe, and he feels a rush of contempt suddenly for these entitled, greedy people in their silks and furs and pearls, content only to talk about others and satiate their unslakable need to know everything about everyone.

“Oh, but how exciting!” Signora Morelli whispers, and there’s a flurry of nervous giggles. “It must be such demanding work, looking at all those bodies, no?”

“What matters is catching him,” Will says, and everyone nods solemnly. “I have to see this all through so that everyone he’s killed can be put to rest and justice will be served.”

“But of course!” She nods vigorously, and there are murmurs of agreement.

Hannibal is practically preening now, and it’s then that Will realizes belatedly that the hand that had earlier been pressed to his lower back has slipped lower still, the touch light but unmistakably possessive to anyone who can see—and they’re standing in full view of the whole room.

Show, don’t tell, he thinks wryly. He’s picking up the rules of the game; he’s sure Hannibal wouldn’t mind him making a few of his own. Or breaking them.

“I’m sorry, I have to go,” he says. “It was lovely to meet you all.”

“Of course, of course!” Signora Morelli says. “The pleasure was all ours, Signor Graham.”

He offers the group one last smile before turning to Hannibal, who opens his mouth, likely to wish him luck or say goodbye, but he never finds out which; before he can say anything Will slides a hand around the back of his neck, leans up and kisses him full on the mouth.

He stiffens with surprise, his lips parting—and Will leaps upon the distraction, tilting his head and thrusting his tongue into his mouth. He makes a startled noise somewhere in the back of his throat, his other hand clutching at Will's shoulder for balance. He recovers quickly enough, his open palm pressing more firmly against his back as his tongue brushes against Will's, tasting of champagne and cold wind.

He draws away and Hannibal blinks out at him dazedly, his eyes glassy and his mouth flushed and swollen. It takes every bit of his willpower to step back and turn away, sparing the group standing beside them in shocked silence a single glance before he walks briskly towards the doors. It's only after he makes it outside into the chilly evening air and halfway to the police car before he allows himself to smile.

Chapter End Notes

gaslight, gatekeep, graham cracker

comments and kudos are always lovely. :)

Qui Vive la Pietà

Chapter Notes

content warning for implied attempted sexual assault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Night has long since sunk its claws into evening by the time the police car comes to a halt, the pulsing blue and red lights overhead casting stark, eerie shadows that writhe along the cobbles. The sky above is crushed black velvet strewn all over with winking diamonds, and the moon is a slash of a smile filled with silver teeth.

It grins down at him as he slams the car door behind him, its muted silver glow held at bay by the flashing police lights surrounding the crime scene and lit street lamps that line the road. His breath mists in the unexpectedly chilly air as he walks towards where a telltale flash of yellow stretches across the mouth of an alley off the street, ducking underneath it and stepping into the narrow space.

Jack is standing by the white canvases stamped with the Questura's seal that hide the bodies behind which he can see the barest silhouette of two figures, hands in his pockets and a hat pulled low over his brow. He turns his head, catching sight of Will as he approaches.

"Thanks for getting here on such short notice," he says by way of greeting. His eyes lower a moment later, one of his eyebrows rising. "Albeit in what looks like a tailored suit."

"I was at the opera."

His brow climbs higher. "The what now?"

Will stuffs his hands in his pockets, feeling a flush creeping up the back of his neck, and his irritated sigh comes out a plume of white vapor. "I'm not allowed to go on dates now?"

Jack puts his hands up, looking faintly amused. "Fine, fine. Now about this latest kill, it was a little unusual. That's why we wanted you to get here as quickly as possible."

"Unusual how?"

"You said yourself that Il Mostro wants to perform, that he's theatrical. And he wants everyone to see his little spectacles." Jack glances around at the cramped alleyway they're standing in, well away from the main street and prying eyes. "Doesn't seem like his kind of venue, does it?"

"No," Will agrees. "It doesn't."

“These bodies are a day old at least,” Jack says. “And if we got to them a day late, then that means—”

“That means he wanted us to get to them a day late,” Will finishes, and Jack nods grimly.

“Yeah.” He glances at Will sideways. “Any ideas as to why?”

He knows exactly why, but all he can do is shake his head. “I don’t know. Maybe he just wanted to buy some time between sounders.”

“So we should be expecting another one soon?”

“Maybe,” he says evasively, avoiding Jack’s eye.

“Well then.” Jack sighs. “I’ll leave you to it. Take your time, let us know when you’re ready for us to come in or if there’s anything you need.”

Will nods as he steps back, putting a brief hand on his shoulder. “And another thing, Will.”

“Yeah?”

“You said earlier that he thinks he’s in love—or he’s starting to be.” Jack begins to turn away as the last of the cops and forensics begin to clear the area, leaving Will standing alone by the hidden bodies. “Looking at this, I’d say he’s sure now. And he’s fallen a long, long way.”

Then he’s gone, ducking underneath the police tape and vanishing a moment later into the shadows gathered beyond thrown into stark relief by the lights. Will lingers only a moment before stepping around the canvases, a strange kind of anticipation rising like a tide in his chest.

The inspiration behind the tableau is instantly recognizable, the two bodies—both young men, their pale bloodless skin stretched tight over jutting bones—positioned carefully and reverently, entwined in an intimate embrace. One body is caught in the cradle of the other’s arms, face tilted upward towards his seeking mouth. The association is immediate; he’s seen countless reproductions of Klimt’s sensual masterpiece.

The bodies are robed in gold silk, placed on cobbles strewn with wilting roses. Their rotting, cloying scent clogs the air, near-overwhelming in its intensity. Their stench masks the smell of human decay; trading one smell of rot for the other.

Two nights ago—that’s when these people had been killed, their organs chosen and cut out and wrapped neatly in brown paper before being tucked away. They had lain here, torn open and humiliated, forced to lie in a facsimile of a kiss as those very organs they were so undeserving of had been put to far better use.

He remembers cooking them. Taking them from Hannibal and unwrapping them, laying them out on the counter knowing full well where they were taken from. Remembers picking up a knife and cutting into them, feeling the blade glide through the meat, still slick with fresh blood. He had cleaned them and cut them into neat cubes, small even chunks like Emiliano had taught him.

Then he had placed them into the pot on the stove and let them simmer.

He can still taste the memory of them on his tongue. Rich, thoroughly cooked to a tender juiciness whose salty flavor burst between his teeth. A little sweet and a little gamey, with just the right hint of bitterness—

"Will?" Jack's voice calls, and he jerks abruptly back to the present, disoriented. He can see Jack's shadow on the alley wall, growing slowly larger as the sound of his footsteps come nearer. "You ready?"

"No, I—I need a minute." The words quiver in the middle, unsteady, and he winces the moment they leave his mouth.

He feels a detached sort of discomfort, settling scratchy and heavy somewhere in his marrow as he watches the shadows recede. When he had thought of the two men lying dead in front of him just now he had thought of them as Hannibal thinks of them; as pigs. Just food, nothing more. Merely two more cuts of meat for him to slice and cook and swallow.

He wipes his damp hands on the fabric of his trousers, made clammy and slippery with sweat despite the sharp chill of the cold. Focusing instead on the onslaught of evidence before him and trying to ignore the swell of nausea that's rising in his throat he shuts his eyes, waiting for the pendulum to swing backward.

It never does; instead he feels something shift inside him subtle but clear, thrumming through his body as though someone had plucked a chord inside him. The reverberations of it shiver through his blood, a note he knows intimately well—and then he opens his eyes.

The men—boys, really, barely older than twenty—are turned towards me, faces set into identical leers. I can smell the cheap alcohol on them, potent and rolling off the pores of their skin in sickening waves. I can smell their intent layered beneath, and it's uglier by far than any amount of spirits can be.

They've followed me, thinking me an easy target. I'm well-dressed and clearly well-off; an expensive watch gleams on my wrist and a finely made bag is slung across my shoulders, but to them that is a mere afterthought. They did not follow me merely to rob me of my possessions.

I turn to face them, my back to the alley wall. They're laughing now, jeering and taunting, triumphant in the thought that they have cornered me, that the alley is far from the main street. That nobody will hear my cries, and nobody will come running. I have to hide my smile as they advance leisurely, so confident in their conquering of me already.

The scalpel is cold against my palm as I flick my wrist and allow it to slide into my waiting fingers. I turn my hand inward to hide it, taking a step backward with every step they take forward until my back is flush against the cold wall of the alley, feeling the grooves between the bricks pressing into the hollows between the knobs of my spine.

"You're pretty," the boy to my right says with a sneer, eyes raking up the length of my body. "You'd look even prettier on your knees. Maybe even on your back."

He takes another step forward. I wait patiently for him to come within arm's reach, schooling my features into an appropriately fearful expression and feeling only a mild impatience; they must think they have the upper hand, right up until the precise moment they realize they do not.

He reaches for me—and then I move.

Between one heartbeat and the next my hand shoots upward, grabbing his wrist. I step sideways and forward, turning and slamming his body against the wall that had, a mere half-second ago, been behind me. The impact knocks the breath from him along with more than a few teeth, and when I step back and let him go it leaves a smear of blood behind as he slides down the wall.

His friend hardly has time to draw in a breath before I am upon him, stabbing the scalpel into his stomach and giving a hard, brutal jerk. He screams as blood spurts from the wound, clutching at the tear in his stomach to hold his guts in.

A swift, hard kick to the other's ribs is enough to keep him incapacitated for the moment as I step back and carefully swipe a finger across the flat of the scalpel's blade, flicking the blood off the metal. I survey the scene before me; both boys on the ground, one with blood flowing freely from the rent in his stomach and the other clutching his chest, wheezing pitifully with blood smeared around his mouth.

I kneel in front of him, arm braced casually on my knee with the scalpel hanging loosely between my fingers. He looks up at me, still gasping, tears welling in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he rasps. "I'm sorry, please just let us go."

He is not sorry. How many unfortunate boys and girls has he followed into alleys such as this one, I wonder. He is only sorry he and his friend chose their target unwisely tonight, and it was a grave mistake indeed. But I feel no pity, no contempt, no righteous anger when I look at him. I feel only hunger.

I smile at him. "Hold still, please," I tell him pleasantly.

I push the hem of his shirt upward, readying the scalpel with a firm grip and poising it just beneath his ribcage. One single incision is all I need to make to free his kidney, clean and precise. Perhaps I will take them both, if they are in good enough condition.

"Please," he whispers. "Please, I'll give you anything, do anything, just don't kill me."

I sigh, my patience wearing thin and thinner as I watch him choke and sob. It's always the same entreaties, the same threats and the same dull life that they plead me to spare. This, me taking it from them—it is a mercy, a boon even, and they do not even realize it. To be elevated to art in death, they serve a far greater purpose than they did in life.

I make the first cut cleanly, recalling the words of one of my instructors and steadying my hand. Confidence in the knowledge of anatomy and in one's own skill is what makes a good

surgeon, and I intend to make a very good surgeon indeed. The man beneath me is nothing but a sum of his parts, skin and muscle and sinew, and it is I who is holding the knife.

He screams and jerks beneath me, his body convulsing as I reach into the incision I had made with my bare hand and rip out his kidney. I inspect it as he writhes on the cobbles, his cries rising to a deafening cacophony. Good enough.

I take his other kidney for good measure, silencing his screams with a swift fist into his throat. He chokes on the ground with blood pulsing sluggishly from the incisions in his sides as I tuck both his kidneys into the paper I had brought, packing them up neatly and sliding them into my bag.

His friend is next. I take his intestines and his lungs, but leave his liver; alcoholics rarely make for a good meal. Once it's done I lean against the wall of the alleyway and watch them die, only mildly entertained by their rattling last breaths and the way their hands press uselessly to the gaping wounds in their skin, trying and failing to staunch the blood.

The cobbles are gleaming red by the time the moon rises, and weariness is beginning to weigh my limbs. But it's only after I press two fingers to the sides of the boys' throats to ensure they are indeed dead that the real work begins.

I position and drape and adorn them to perfection, recreating a masterpiece of paint and gold in flesh and blood. I smile at my own sentimentality as it comes to life beneath my careful hands, this love letter I have crafted with such devotion. My design has shifted, changing near-imperceptibly but changed nonetheless, since I met you.

You are in every dying petal of the roses I have strewn across the cobblestones to hide the blood, in every golden thread woven into the robes draped over the embracing lovers' bodies. You are in every painting that blossoms across the streets of Florence, paintings I have rendered in brushstrokes of blood and screams. Everything is for you; every body, every organ I take, every meal I cook with them.

You are the center of my universe, the axis mundi around which all else revolves. You are mine, my doing and my undoing, my becoming and my unbecoming. You are my design.

Winter has crept her way unobtrusively into Florence, slyly slipping them all by and uncloaking her frosty robe over the city streets when they had all least been expecting it. The wind turns cold and brisk and the sky darkens unexpectedly, rain sluicing down at odd times of day like tiny blades of ice slicing at any exposed skin it can reach.

Will had ducked quickly into the shelter of a bus to avoid the worst of a particularly sudden bout, standing sandwiched between two other passengers and watching the city smear by outside and shivering in his threadbare coat that's half-soaked through already. It renders itself in smears of color and texture, streaked with a kinetic mosaic of falling droplets and multicolored raincoats passing by.

"San Niccolò," the conductor calls from somewhere in the front, his voice cutting momentarily through the haze of cigarette smoke and humidity thickening the air. "*Due minuti!"*

On a sudden, unidentifiable impulse Will finds himself shouldering through the crowd, clutching his bag as he makes his way to the front of the bus. It screeches to a jerking halt just as he hastily pushes a couple of notes into the conductor's outstretched hand, ignoring the way he eyes Will's worn jacket and muddy shoes critically—San Niccolò is a wealthy area, certainly too wealthy for an urchin like him—and splashes down into the street.

A tremulous late afternoon sun has emerged from where it had earlier been hidden, gilding the rain-spangled streets and making them shimmer as if dusted in gold. He walks briskly through the sparse crowd, head down against the brisk breeze that tousles his hair as he turns onto Hannibal's familiar wide street.

He jogs up the steps to his apartment, already partly out of breath, and raps his knuckles on the door. He could easily reach the spare key—tucked onto the minute precipice made by the top of the doorframe, an uncharacteristically pedestrian hiding place—but he doesn't, not this time.

When there's no answer he presses the doorbell, hearing the deep, rich chime echo through the cavernous space beyond the door. He waits, still breathing hard, for ten seconds, then twenty, then thirty. When he still hears only silence he steps back and turns away, feeling a strange, inexplicable sort of panic.

He rapidly descends the stairs into the street, casting a single cursory glance over the few pedestrians milling around, eyes searching for a dark coat, a suspicious gait, a watchful gaze. But he's not there—and neither is Hannibal.

Cursing under his breath he turns on his heel, moving instead towards where he knows Hannibal will likely be and, if he's guessing correctly, Pazzi will be too. And if he is, then it may be time for a confession or two.

Nearly running as he is it takes him only half an hour or so to reach the intimidating set of buildings where Hannibal studies, quickly explaining to the security guard at the gate that he's here to visit a friend. He cuts rapidly across the perfectly manicured lawn towards the building marked as surgical training, and he turns to go around the back when he spots him.

Between the scant gap separating the next two buildings is the figure of a man, hat pulled low over his eyes and a familiar thick, dark coat beneath which Will knows holsters are slung, guns tucked into the leather pouches. He's turned away from Will, his eyes fixed on something he can't see yet.

Quickly rounding the corner of the building he stays out of Pazzi's line of sight, moving towards the group of young men and women standing near the wall, the building's back door propped open with a folding chair. He spots Hannibal immediately; he's standing a ways apart from the other boys, a lone figure near the end of the compound.

He's leaning against the bruised brick wall with one long leg bent up under him, his head tilted backward and his eyes closed. He looks spent and weary, a far cry from the elegant, always-sophisticated Hannibal Will knows him to be; he's dressed in a plain cotton shirt and black slacks and his hair is uncharacteristically loose and free of product, sweat-damp strands falling in tousled and messy quills across his eyes.

Despite everything Will takes a moment to pause and simply admire him, a masterpiece in gold, ink and charcoal brought to life. He's never so much as held a pencil in his whole life but suddenly he finds his fingers itching for one, if only to capture the way the light casts slanting shadows across his sharp face and how his body is a single perfectly rendered unbroken line, from the curve of his throat to the gentle slope of his chest to the sweeping angles of his legs.

Uncaring if Pazzi sees him Will moves towards him, feeling a few of the students' eyes on him as he does. Their brows rise as he makes his way unmistakably towards Hannibal, and he hears a low swarm of mutters rise as he passes by.

He sees Hannibal lift one of his hands up to his mouth, something slender and white caught between his fingers. A lazy curl of smoke follows from between his parted lips, snaking through the air before dissipating. Confident that the scent of it will mask his own Will approaches with little caution, keeping his footsteps light on the cobbles below.

“I didn’t know you smoke,” he says by way of greeting, coming to a stop in front of him. He’s out of breath.

Hannibal’s eyes open, falling on him a moment later. Will doesn’t think he—or anything at all—could ever startle Hannibal, but he seems, just this once, to have taken him by surprise.

“A bad habit,” he admits, straightening, “but an alleviating one. Spending all day in an operating room can be strenuous.”

“I hadn’t taken you for the self-destructive type.”

“It seems none of us are entirely immune to the Freudian death drive.” He moves away from the wall, stepping closer. “What are you doing here, Will?”

“I wanted to see you.” He takes a step of his own forward, acutely aware of the eyes watching them, both from the shadows in his periphery and Hannibal’s now openly ogling peers. Leaning upward on the tips of his toes he lets his lips drag down the side of Hannibal’s jaw, trying as hard as he can to ignore the jeering laughter that rings out as the other boys beside them clap and whistle.

“You’re being followed,” he murmurs into Hannibal’s ear, lingering for a moment longer before starting to draw away. “He’s here.”

Something in Hannibal’s mahogany eyes clicks, realizing and understanding following confusion on swift wings. His hand comes up almost impossibly fast, fingers wrapping around Will’s wrist. He tugs him in close again, his head dipping down towards Will’s.

“Where?” he breathes. His breath ghosts over Will’s cheek, smelling faintly of antiseptics and nicotine.

“Just ahead. Between the next two buildings.” He draws back, Hannibal’s fingers still around his wrist, then says, “Come home with me?”

Hannibal’s eyes flick over his own rapidly, as if he were trying to read a particularly vexing book. He looks at Will like that often, as though he’s some stubbornly unsolvable equation that he yearns to find the answer to. He wonders if that’s how he himself looks sometimes, when he looks at Hannibal.

“I will, when I’m finished,” Hannibal says finally, still staring at him. “I’ll be done by six.”

Reaching down, Will plucks the cigarette from between Hannibal’s fingers and drops it onto the negligible space between their feet, crushing it out with the toe of his shoe. “I can wait.”

Hannibal nods, slowly releasing his wrist. His inscrutable expression softens, his eyes warming fractionally. “It was good to see you, Will,” he says.

Then he’s gone, stepping back towards where the others are trooping one by one back into the building, still whispering and casting him sideways glances. He puts his hands in his pockets and watches them go, and he feels almost as though he can actually feel Pazzi’s gaze burning into the back of his neck.

“Good catch, Lecter,” he hears one of the boys say as the door closes, sounding impressed. “Never took you for the pretty type, though.”

There’s a laugh and then the door shuts with a resounding clang, leaving Will standing alone outside. He feels a bemused smile tug at his mouth as he glances down at the crushed cigarette beneath his feet, its tip still glowing a faint, gentle orange.

The ash has scattered across the cobbles in an artful crescent of gray, and as he watches the trajectory of its graceful arc is marred by a sudden gust of wind that tears through the compound, sweeping it away. He turns, his eyes following the movement of it as it’s carried by the current. And when it whispers into the space where only moments before a shadowy figure stood, there is nobody there to feel its sting.

Night is beginning to fall and Hannibal welcomes the icy bite of the chilly air as he steps outside, cooling his sweat-heated skin. The smell of the operating room is still clinging to him, sterile steel and disinfectant and rank blood, and not for the first time he wishes there were showers in the training area so he could wash the staleness away.

The sky has sprung out in the bizarre shades of the sunset, streaks of amber and lilac and rose unfurling above him like ink dripping into water and blooming outward in flourishes of color. It casts long shadows across the parking lot, their dusky fingers stretching along the cobbles and towards where Will is leaning against a lamppost, waiting for him.

He’s framed by the sunset and the golden glow of the light above, casting his face in darkness. It turns his eyes to twin blue will-o’-the-wisps hovering in the murky dark, beckoning him closer and enticing him with the promise of sin yet threatening to vanish should he come too close.

“He’s gone,” Will says in lieu of greeting, making no move to unlatch himself from the lamppost and merely tilting his head up to meet Hannibal’s eye as he comes to a stop in front of him.

“Who is he?”

“A detective at the Questura, Rinaldo Pazzi. He was at the museum the day we met.”

A memory rises to the forefront of his mind—the scent of smoke and leather, a thinly veiled threat and the suggestion of a gun in his pocket. Seeing the painting in front of him and his own sketch as a mirror of it beneath him, his and Will’s faces in Zephyrus and Chloris’ places.

“I remember him,” he says. “He has already made his suspicions known to me.”

“He knows,” Will says mildly. He looks and sounds remarkably nonchalant, the picture of carelessness with his tousled curls and wind-pinked cheeks, hands in his pockets as he lounges against the post. He raises his eyebrows at Hannibal, and it’s almost a challenge.

“How long has he known?” Hannibal asks.

“A while,” Will says. “Probably since he first saw you at the gallery all those months ago. He couldn’t exactly make a case out of his intuition, so he’s been biding his time.”

“And does his intuition extend to you?”

“It did at first.” Will straightens at last, taking a step forward. His face is unreadable, a blank canvas. “But it doesn’t anymore.”

“And what has prompted this sudden shift in judgement?”

“Let’s have dinner,” Will says, sidestepping him and starting to move towards the gate. Hannibal turns hastily and follows, falling into step beside him. “Emiliano said he’d make carbonara today.”

They walk in silence towards the main road, the gravel underfoot crunching loudly beneath their shoes in the stillness. The bus stop is less than a kilometer away and they reach it within minutes, the road otherwise empty with nothing but the sound of the whistling wind to keep them company.

“I saw what you left near the Duomo a couple days ago,” Will says finally. He’s staring into the street, his voice still as light and uncaring as though he were talking about something entirely mundane and unremarkable. “Klimt. I love that painting. It’s beautiful.”

“It is indeed.”

“But what you made of it was… more than that. It was perfect.”

He turns to look at Hannibal, his eyes very blue in the burgeoning dark. “When I closed my eyes and made time turn back, I didn’t see it as a great pendulum swinging backwards as I usually do. I didn’t feel it, it just… happened. One moment I was me and the next I was you.”

“Conjoined,” Hannibal murmurs.

“You and I are beginning to blur.” Will lifts his face to catch the breeze, its frivolous fingers lifting the curls of his hair like shavings of charcoal. “Your intent and your design, your crimes all becoming mine.”

“What did you see behind closed eyes?”

“I saw you, I became you. I *was* you. Not the way I become the other killers, with just evidence and intent piecing itself together in my mind. I lived the whole thing, down to every last specificity. I knew everything intimately, as if it were my own memory I was reliving and not yours.”

“And what did it make you feel?” His voice is soft despite the howl of the wind and the emptiness of the street.

“I felt…” He shuts his eyes, face still upturned towards the sky. “I felt—”

The loud screech of tires announces the bus’s arrival, cutting Will’s words short. His eyes open, and he takes a quick step back as it grinds to a noisy stop in front of the station, its doors opening with the squeal of rusty hinges. He casts Hannibal only a glance before climbing inside, leaving him to follow.

The ride is short but uncomfortable; the bus is crammed full of people, and he’s almost glad he’s standing clutching one of the grimy poles that rattles ominously with every pothole the bus hits as it careens down the street—he suspects no amount of detergent could possibly salvage his trousers should he have sat on one of the stained seats.

A light rain has begun to fall by the time they reach Will’s squat little apartment building, fine droplets hanging like mist in the air. The whole place smells invitingly of cheese and cooking meat, likely courtesy of Emiliano, and it fills the air with a pleasant, welcome warmth.

“He’ll kill us if we interrupt him cooking,” Will says, taking his hand and tugging him up the stairs. Winston is nowhere to be found, however, and Will tells him with a laugh that he always hangs expectantly around Emiliano’s heels whenever he cooks, waiting anxiously for him to drop a scrap of meat.

He allows Will to lead him up to his apartment, shutting the door behind the two of them. Unable to resist he turns the moment the lock clicks, a hand curling around the back of Will’s neck and pushing him against the door, leaning down to capture his mouth in a kiss.

Will hums, pleased, fingers running down Hannibal’s spine languidly. He parts his lips and allows Hannibal’s tongue to push into his mouth, seeking and finding and tasting. He’s familiar already, and yet he finds he cannot get enough, knows he will never be able to get enough. He knows that even if he saw Will every day, forever, he will always remember each and every time as if it were the first and the last.

His hands find the arches of Will’s hips, thumbs cresting over delicate skin stretched over arcing bone. He pulls Will flush against him and he moans into Hannibal’s mouth soft and

warm, his lips sweet and inviting. The topography of him is intensely familiar already, the ridges on the roof of his mouth and the supple yield of his skin against Hannibal's fingers.

Will pushes him forward, not breaking the kiss as he gently but no less insistently steers him towards his bed. The backs of Hannibal's knees hit the edge and then he's losing balance, half-sprawling across the mattress. Will is upon him not even a moment later, knees on either side of his hips and hands flat on his chest pressing him down.

A bright, sweet burst of pain blossoms from where Will's teeth close over his bottom lip, hard enough to reopen the cut he had made mere days ago. The still-sore, delicate skin tears beneath the assault and blood floods his mouth, salty-sweet. Will hums contentedly as he sucks the cut into his mouth, his tongue lapping at the bruising skin until it stops bleeding.

The delicious sting draws a low, pleased sound from his mouth and Will swallows it down as eagerly as he did Hannibal's blood, his hands sliding beneath the hem of Hannibal's shirt and up his chest, nails raking down his bare skin. Hannibal makes to put his hands on Will's hips to draw him down closer, but strong slender fingers wrap around his wrists before he can, lifting them over his head and pinning them firmly to the mattress.

He thinks he may be content to die here, on his back with Will's body caging his own the way ribs cage a wildly beating heart. His tongue is in Hannibal's mouth, tasting of rain and cold wind and coffee tinged with the sweet copper of his own blood. It's intoxicating, addicting almost, sliding sweet and heady down his throat like nectar he would be content to be drunk on forever.

Swearing softly Will tears himself away a moment later and sits up, his legs still straddling Hannibal's hips and his mouth smeared with his blood. He looks magnificent—ravager and ravaged, devourer and devoured in equal measure.

"Wait," he says, and the word is half a groan. "Not—not now, Hannibal."

"I would admit I had been waiting to do just that since I saw you standing in front of me earlier today," Hannibal says, and he sounds breathless. He makes no move to free his wrists, still trapped in Will's grip above his head. There is something singularly gratifying about being at his mercy like this, offered up as if in sacrifice.

"Me too." Will's thumbs trace slow arcs over the thrumming pulse points in his wrists, nails scraping tantalizingly over the delicate skin in a shadow of a teasing threat. There's a slow, simmering sort of hunger in his eyes as they roam over him; a predator considering its latest capture, surveying the meat.

He releases Hannibal's wrists a moment later, straightening. "We need to talk, Hannibal."

"Talk, then." He makes an attempt to heave himself up by his elbows, shaking his hair out of his eyes. "You said that Detective Pazzi's suspicions of you were no more. Why?"

Will sighs, rolling off Hannibal entirely and allowing him to pull himself into a sitting position. He runs his fingers through his snarled hair, and it springs free in a riot of curls

when he lowers his hands. “He’s been watching you,” he says. “He stands outside your apartment and stakes the place out, watches who comes and who goes.”

“So that was Pazzi.” Hannibal frowns. “I had noticed, but I did not make the association between him and the Questura.”

“He warned me about you,” Will says, “the day after we met. He knew, before everything. Even before me. Somehow, he knew. And he knew about me, too, but he didn’t have any evidence. He would make threats, insinuations…”

“Will,” Hannibal says, “why didn’t you say something?”

Will only shrugs, still avoiding his gaze. “It was just… it didn’t seem worth mentioning. Just another detective making theories without any backing.”

“There is more,” Hannibal deduces, his eyes catching on the hesitance tugging at his face, the way he’s pulling at a stray thread on the hem of his sweater nervously.

“I saw him, the day after…” His cheeks redden. “After I spent the night. He followed me, and I confronted him. He told me he knows he’s going to catch you, that he’d be willing to hide me and that the Questura would protect me if I came forward that you were… coercing me. Holding something over my head, blackmailing me to stay with you in exchange for what I know.”

He watches Will, saying nothing, merely waiting. Will twists his fingers in his lap, fidgeting as he does whenever he’s nervous. He doesn’t meet Hannibal’s eye.

“So I told him I would,” he says finally.

“You told him you would… give them information about me in exchange for protection?”

“I told him enough to get him probable cause for a warrant,” Will says, and now his eyes slide upward to lock with Hannibal’s. Understanding follows swiftly after, rushing through him like water freed from a dam.

“I see,” is all he says.

“They’re not going to find anything,” Will says. “And Pazzi pulled as many strings as he could trying to get this warrant. He told me he would keep my name anonymous but that there was a witness, and without any proof that it was me they won’t find out. And once they search your house and find nothing, it’ll be his word against mine. And the odds won’t be in his favor.”

Stunned, Hannibal can only stare at him.

“He’ll be ruined,” Will says. “His reputation will be entirely destroyed, and they won’t let him consult on this case anymore. He’ll be lucky if they even let him keep his badge.”

His voice is steady, his gaze unwavering as he looks at Hannibal entirely unapologetic and unremorseful, a hunter confident that his snare will catch the hare unawares. He feels a

sudden swell of pride and love in his chest for his cunning boy, so ruthless and savage in his design.

“Oh, Will,” he says, adoration suffusing every word, “I would expect nothing less from you.”

“I just couldn’t—I couldn’t stand the thought of them taking you.” His eyes are fierce, alight with wild flame. “You don’t belong to them. They can’t have you.”

“*‘They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb’*,” Hannibal murmurs. “It is a fearsome, wonderful thing, divine retribution delivered.”

A humorless smile twists Will’s mouth. “Whatever I am, Hannibal, I’m not divine.”

“Oh, but you are, beloved.” He takes Will’s hand, lifting it to his lips. “Your wrath is fueled by righteous fire, and it is a thing of terrible beauty. To look upon you with mortal eyes would most certainly mean searing them with the fire of heaven.”

“God, you’re dramatic,” Will says. But he’s smiling anyway, his eyes glittering. “And a sap.”

“Only for you, dear Will.”

“I know.” He leans over, pressing a quick kiss to Hannibal’s mouth. “Now let’s go downstairs. Dinner is ready.”

“Will was right,” Hannibal tells Emiliano solemnly as he and Will wash the dishes, Winston hovering hopefully around their ankles. “It seems I do not make the best carbonara in Florence after all.”

“Sweet-talker,” Emiliano laughs, reaching out to clasp Hannibal’s shoulder with a weathered hand. “Perhaps one day I will give you my recipe.”

“It would be an honor.” He smiles and Will snatches the distraction, bending to sneak Winston a bit of leftover pancetta. He snatches it up eagerly, his tail nearly upsetting a stack of pots on the floor.

“The trick is to brown the butter,” Emiliano says, tapping the side of his head with a wink. “Brown butter is like liquid gold. You put it into any dish and suddenly it is transformed into something of wondrous sublimity.”

“You’re both a pair,” Will snorts, kneeling to rub Winston’s head as he sniffs his sleeves for more meat. “Maybe the two of you will run off together someday and leave me here. What do you think, Winston?”

Winston woofs happily, his wagging tail knocking one of the pots over with a clatter.

“He agrees,” Will says, standing.

“Hardly,” Hannibal says from behind him, and Will clamps down on a yelp as his fingers gently pinch his skin through his clothes—far lower than is appropriate. “We wouldn’t last a day without you.”

He spins around, affronted, and Hannibal merely smiles at him artlessly. Bastard.

“Dear God above,” Emiliano says. “Go on, both of you. Upstairs. I will clean the rest of the kitchen.”

“No,” Will says. “We can—”

“Shush. Go. Winston and I will clean up, won’t we?” He leans down, a weathered hand scratching indulgently between Winston’s ears as he looks up with enormous brown eyes. “Yes, we will.”

Will sighs, then turns on his heel and stomps out of the kitchen, muttering under his breath. Hannibal’s little smile widens and he says nothing, merely following Will out of Emiliano’s apartment and up the stairs. Will’s door has barely closed behind them before Will pounces, pinning Hannibal against it as the lock clicks shut.

He hears Hannibal laugh, soft and surprised and delighted, and a moment later the sound is swallowed up when their mouths crash together, hard and unyielding. He holds Hannibal against the door, wedging a knee between his legs to keep him in place. Hannibal does nothing to free himself, merely tilting his head and thrusting his hips lazily against Will’s, the torturous friction of their clothed half-hard cocks chafing against each other sending ripples of pleasure down his spine.

He pulls away, his head spinning, impatient and aching. Hannibal is looking at him, hair tangled and pupils blown wide, naked unguarded longing gleaming clear as day in his eyes. He looks ruined. Will wants to ruin him even more, wants to see him come entirely undone at his feet.

“Get on the bed,” he says roughly.

Hannibal swallows, breathing hard, then obeys, stepping away and levering himself onto the mattress facing Will. Will reaches up for the buttons of his own shirt, quickly undoing them and nearly ripping the fabric in his haste to shed it. He tosses it aside once it comes off and makes quick work of his slacks and his boxers, feeling Hannibal's eyes devouring every inch of bared skin.

He crosses the room in two long strides, crawling onto the bed and into Hannibal's lap where he's half-propped against the bedframe. He leans forward and breathes him in, feeling the scent of him settle musky and earthy in his lungs. There's something almost carnal about the way he smells after a long day beneath the surgical lights, steeping in sweat and concentration and the power that comes with having someone's body and life at his mercy.

Hannibal says his name, breathy and soft and like it's the only thing he can remember, the only thing that matters, the way he always does. Will leans forward and kisses him just to taste the way he says it, to lick the sound of it right out of his mouth.

He kisses him again, then again and again and again as his hands work at the buttons of Hannibal's shirt and trousers, pulling and tugging at the fabric until it's out of the way. Hannibal's hands are cradling his face, his mouth soft and yielding and tasting of wine and butter.

Will reaches blindly beside him towards the bedside table, hardly looking as he yanks the drawer open and rummages inside until he finds what he was looking for. Drawing out the jar of oil he pulls away just long enough to coat a hand with it, Hannibal's half-lidded gaze heavy on his skin as he reaches between them and wraps his oil-slick fingers unflinchingly around Hannibal's cock.

He moans long and luxurious, his hands coming to rest on his hips in a bruising grip and his head falling back against the rickety bedframe behind him as Will's hand moves over him in measured, sweeping strokes. His eyes fall shut halfway, lips parted, cheeks flushing dark pink. He looks beautiful and debauched, and suddenly Will is so *empty* that he almost feels it like hunger clawing at his stomach, a caged beast laying waste inside him and longing to be set free.

He withdraws and sits up, hands moving to clench on Hannibal's shoulders. His eyes flutter open, finding his as he lines Hannibal's cock to his entrance, breathing hard.

"Will," he says slowly, voice rough and thickened with desire. "Wait—"

The words choke off into a groan as Will starts to lower himself down onto his cock, a curse scraping past his throat at the sudden intrusion. He shoves the discomfort away, forcing himself down another inch and then another and another, and it's both too much and not enough all at once.

Hannibal's fingernails dig almost painfully into his skin, and it's the only warning he gets before his hips thrust upward instinctively, filling Will all the way in a single movement. Unprepared for the sudden onslaught of sensation he cries out, the sound echoing harshly in the stillness as their bodies slam together.

“Will,” Hannibal says, and it’s half a groan. “I—are you—”

“Don’t say you’re sorry.” He drags in a sharp gasp of air, the burn of the stretch melting into agonizing pleasure and desperate fullness. “That was perfect.”

“I would not have you do anything you do not wish to,” Hannibal says, his eyes wide and dark. His skin gleams with sweat, and Will wants to lick every drop of it off his body.

He grinds his hips downward, an involuntary groan scraping past his throat as the movement makes the blunt head of Hannibal’s cock brush against his prostate. He feels himself clench around the short, intense ripples of sensation that thrum inside his body and Hannibal moans, his fingernails digging into the meat of Will’s back. The pain is a delicious thing and he swallows it down greedily, relishing in the knowledge that there will be bruises in the shape of Hannibal’s fingers imprinted on his skin for days afterward.

He's breathing hard, stretched open unbearably full and aching to move, every nerve in his body screaming for it. But he’s determined not to just yet, intent on drawing this out for as long as possible.

“You made me kill a man,” he says, and his voice is hoarse with effort.

Hannibal’s hands tighten around him, his fingers slipping on Will’s sweat-slicked skin. “And you looked impossibly beautiful bathed in his blood, my love,” he says. “I would have you kill a hundred, a thousand more, just to see you as you were then.”

“And what if I decided to kill you someday?” He presses his thumbs into the tender flesh of Hannibal’s throat, feeling his breath against his palms and his heartbeat against his fingers. It would be easy, to close his hands around his neck and squeeze. Feel the life leave him one gasp at a time, feel his pulse grow sluggish before it stops entirely.

“Then the last thing I see in this life would be you with my blood on your hands, and for that I would love you even more fiercely in the end.” Hannibal is looking up at him, his face full of such naked adoration that it makes him shiver somewhere deep in his bones. “It would be the greatest of honors to die by your hand, Will.”

“God, Hannibal.” He closes his eyes, turning his face into the curve of Hannibal’s neck and breathing hard. He tightens his hands on Hannibal’s shoulders and gives his hips a tentative rock, exhaling roughly at the sudden wave of pleasure and hearing Hannibal’s answering gasp like an echo, a mirror of his own.

Knowing gentleness will not sate the emptiness inside him he waits only another moment before beginning to move in earnest, every thrust of his hips short and hard and deep. His whole bed sways with the movement, the bedframe creaking and hitting the wall with a loud rattle with each one. It will be no mystery to anyone in either of the buildings on either side of them—or Emiliano downstairs—what they’re doing.

Undeterred by the knowledge he lifts himself up higher, slamming himself back down onto Hannibal’s cock and angling his hips to nail his prostate every time their hips meet, shuddering at the sharp, intense shocks of pleasure that travel like electricity up his spine.

Hannibal's fingers grasp at his skin, gripping hard and pushing him down further onto his cock as his own hips lift to meet Will's with each rolling grind. He can't help the moan that it drags out of him, filled so thoroughly that he knows every moment without this will be empty, hollow, lacking.

Neither of them have the patience to draw out their hungry, desperate coupling, each greedily chasing their own pleasure and drawing out as much as they can from the other. It's a violent tussle of give and take, a balance teetering constantly between the two with neither gaining the upper hand.

Hannibal is groaning underneath him, flushed all the way down his chest and his beautiful face slack with pleasure, eyes glassy and mouth open. He is the only one, Will knows, who has ever had him like this, who ever will. Nobody else will ever see him entirely undone as he is now, as only Will can make him. It will only ever be him.

The knowledge fills him with a heady sort of power and he ruts his hips desperately into Hannibal's one last time, groaning his name as his climax slams into him with the force of a battering ram. It crushes the breath from his lungs, his vision going white for a split second. He feels himself clench impossibly tight and then Hannibal is gasping out a curse in a language he doesn't even recognize, his head falling back as he follows Will over the edge.

The return to reality is slow, sluggish; he awakens in a tangle of sweat-slicked limbs and breaths tickling his hair, feeling Hannibal's cock softening inside him. He hums, turning his face into Hannibal's chest and allowing his eyes to slide closed.

They simply lie like that awhile, drifting between sleep and wakefulness for the better part of an hour until Hannibal murmurs something too soft and slurred for him to make out, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck before pulling out of him and rolling out of bed. Will drowses for a few minutes longer, then follows.

They strip the bed of its ruined sheets and lay new ones down, showering to wash away the sweat and spend slicking their skin before getting back into bed, neither having strength enough to do little more than share a few slow, syrupy kisses before they drift off.

He wakes again a few hours later, wrapped in the circle of Hannibal's arms. He's fast asleep behind Will, his breaths soft and even on his nape. It's dark and still outside, and as he watches the moon climb the rickety stairway of the stars he thinks he sees the edge of a shadow in the street, watching them.

Carefully so as not to wake Hannibal he extricates himself from the cage of his arms, getting out of bed and moving towards the window. He peers down, chary, almost expecting to see a familiar figure standing cloaked in the darkness looking up at him—but the street is empty.

He's still staring out into the darkness when he hears a faint rustle behind him, then a low, deep intake of breath. "Will?" Hannibal's voice says softly, heavy with sleep. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." He turns, shivering from the sting of the cold air on his naked body. "Just—couldn't sleep."

“Come back to bed.” Hannibal holds a hand out, fingers curling upward beckoningly. “It’s so cold.”

He slides back into bed, exhaling a relieved breath as Hannibal’s body heat and the remnants of his own clinging to the sheets and mattress envelop him like an embrace. A moment later Hannibal’s arms are there, wrapping tight around his waist and pulling their bodies flush against each other.

“He’s not there, Will,” Hannibal murmurs, nuzzling gently into his neck. “Your worry is a tangible thing.”

“I know.” He sighs. “It’s just… been there for so long, hovering over me. I just want it to be over.”

“It will be, soon. You made sure of that, Will.”

“What if I’m wrong? If something—goes wrong, and they catch you and it’s my fault, and —”

“Will.” Hannibal gently tugs him closer, shaking his head. “You’ve done nothing wrong. You’ve set everything into place so perfectly, each and every piece set down considered and careful. You’ve borne the brunt of this alone for a long while, carrying another’s suspicion of me on your own shoulders. It’s a heavy weight to carry, and placing it all down suddenly will be a demanding thing.”

He turns his face into the curve of Hannibal’s shoulder, squeezing his eyes shut. “I know. But it doesn’t just go away.”

“No, it does not. And nor will Pazzi’s suspicion. It will only grow, and the coals of his apathy will fan into contempt. In contempt such as this men are reckless, thoughtless. He will ensure his own destruction when the moment strikes.”

“But he won’t disappear.”

“No,” Hannibal says. “He will retreat for a time, but he will return. And when he does his anger and desperation will be fierce indeed.”

“You’re wasted on surgery,” Will mutters after a moment, without opening his eyes. “You’d do better poking around in people’s heads rather than their bodies.”

Hannibal laughs softly. “Perhaps.”

There’s silence for a few long minutes, pregnant with implication and expectation. Finally Hannibal says softly, “You know this means that when the time comes, we will have to kill him.”

Will opens his eyes and meets Hannibal’s gaze grimly, but when he speaks his voice is steady and calm. “Yes,” he says. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

you can pry the headcanons that surgeon hannibal smoked and that he and will are that one pda obsessed couple in college that nobody can stand to be within ten feet of out of my cold, dead hands.

Degli Dei Falsi e Bugiardi

Chapter Notes

content warning for disturbing imagery and mentions of abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morgue is silent and cold, the flickering fluorescent lightbulbs overhead casting their arctic, sinister blue-white glow over the rows of metal tables all over the room. It leaches the bodies laid atop them of color, their already-waxy skin turned translucent and milky-white and the once-garish smears of blood around the incisions turned to dull rust.

The forensics standing around the bodies are murmuring, hushed whispers that echo harshly around the room; how none of the incisions had been made postmortem, how they had been made with such incredible precision that it can only be surgical. How Il Mostro cannot possibly be human to commit acts of such sadistic cruelty with what can only be described as a detached deific amusement.

Sometimes they whisper about Will, too. How there must be something wrong with him, to be able to reconstruct the fantasies of a man like Il Mostro so easily. How one day he might shatter, come apart at the seams and no longer be able to tell himself from the Monster at all.

“There are several organs missing,” one of the women standing by the bodies announces, setting her scalpel aside. Will finds himself momentarily transfixed by the blood clinging to its blade, a veneer of metallic crimson that catches the lights overhead. “Kidneys in one, and the lungs and intestines in the other.”

“Il Mostro ate well that night,” murmurs a voice behind him, and Will turns just as Pazzi steps into the morgue, the door shutting behind him with a clang. He looks pale in the washed-out light, his flinty eyes turned the color of pitch.

Will turns back to the bodies, fingers clenched into fists inside his pockets. Pazzi is stepping up beside him a moment later, his gaze lingering on the cut-open corpses before them, on the hollow spaces inside them where their organs had once been.

“Where’s Jack?” Will asks without preamble, and Pazzi shoots him a vaguely amused look.

“He couldn’t make it today,” he says. “There was a meeting at the college, something he could not avoid.”

“Seems a little below your pay grade, doesn’t it, being down here for the autopsy?”

Pazzi raises a brow. “Every stage of the crime is important, even this one. Especially since Il Mostro takes his keepsakes home with him.”

“You’re moving to flush the beast out of his lair, have your gun aimed for him where he’s hidden in plain sight,” Will murmurs. “You might be closer than ever to catching him, but now is when you need to be the most careful. Not of him, but of your own arrogance. If you move too quickly, too recklessly, he will see you, and he will slip away.”

“We will catch him, I am sure of it,” Pazzi insists. “We have the upper hand here.”

“If you think you have the upper hand, it’s because he wants you to think that,” Will says. “If you don’t tread carefully then it’ll be you getting caught, not him. And if that happens, he will kill you.”

He turns, tilting his head with a small smile. “I’m usually right about these things.”

“I have made my case with the Inspector,” Pazzi says in a low voice, turning towards Will. “I told him of your predicament as well, though I did not mention you by name.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he would procure a warrant for me by Friday,” he says. “Four days from now. He wishes to see the Monster behind bars as much as I.”

“So this Friday they’re—you’re—going to go to Hannibal’s house? Raid it?”

“We will conduct a thorough search, and upon finding evidence we will arrest him,” Pazzi confirms, nodding. “And we will find evidence.”

“I’m sure you will.” He raises a brow. “If you know where to look.”

“Oh, I know exactly where to look.” Pazzi sounds grim. “The first thing I will order them to check is the fridge.”

He feels a humorless smile tug at his lips, turning away. “And how will you test it?”

“I will bring our team of scientists with me. We will test it then and there, so there will be no time for tricks and deceit.”

“Do you need me to be there?”

“No,” Pazzi says. “I do not wish for you be there when we arrive; it may put you in harm’s way.”

“‘Harm’s way’” he echoes softly. “Do you mean Hannibal, or yourself?”

“There will be no reason for me or any of my men to mean you any harm,” Pazzi says. “I understand you are a victim here, Signor Graham.”

“So,” Will says slowly, “when the time comes, if there’s any inquiry into my role in any of this…”

“You will be fully pardoned,” Pazzi says with what he must think is a reassuring smile, laying a hand on his shoulder. “I will see to it myself that you are not blamed for any mistakes that you had no choice but to make.”

The words make a white-holt bolt of rage dart through him like the crack of a whip, but he swallows it down. He’s always presented as a wounded bird, crippled by his empathy and made vulnerable by the weight of others’ burdens. But he knows that that is not entirely true, knows that while his wings may be broken, he has talons of his own. Can still blind and maim, despite it all.

And he won’t bury himself in the backyard, not this time.

“Good,” is all he says instead. “Have you told anyone else about this?”

“I want to draw as little suspicion as possible,” Pazzi says. “So as of now the only people who know of this are you, me and the Inspector.”

“Until the job is done.”

“Then all of Italy will know our names.” Pazzi’s eyes glint harshly in the light. “It is no small feat, to capture a monster.”

“No,” Will says quietly. “It is not.”

They watch the forensics awhile, heads still bent over the bodies. They had been bled, but not efficiently—they had been at the mercy of their wounds, and the hand that dealt them had been anything but merciful. It was a slow, excruciating death, allowing them to feel every sluggish pulse of their hearts grow fainter with every gout of blood that left them and painted the cobbles red.

“What does he want with you?” Pazzi asks after a minute or so of silence, almost as if he can’t help it. The doctors and dieners are beginning to lay sheets over the bodies, swathes of starched white fabric covering up the fastidious mutilations, the incisions carved into their skin with such meticulous grace. “Why keep you with him? Why not just kill you?”

They begin to wheel the bodies out and Will takes a step back to leave alongside them, casting Pazzi a single backwards glance before he goes.

“Because he’s in love with me,” he says.

He turns and leaves the morgue, letting the door close and leaving Pazzi standing inside, a lone figure with the lights overhead guttering one last time and illuminating the flicker of something almost like realization on his face before it falls shut between them and hides him from view.

The sharp, tinkling sounds of the harpsichord greet him before he even walks into Hannibal's apartment, the notes falling under and over each other like the burbling rapids of a stream rushing gleefully through its course. He doesn't recognize the piece; it must be something he's never heard before.

A single gentle push to the front door tells him it's unlocked and he lets himself in quietly, carefully pushing it shut behind him and toeing off his shoes to ensure his footfalls are soundless on the marble floors. The music swells in an achingly sorrowful crescendo as he approaches, a flurry of notes played all at once like a snowstorm that fills the air, blinding him.

Will pauses at the archway that leads to the study, leaning against it so as to simply watch Hannibal play for a moment. His back is to Will, head bent over the harpsichord as his fingers move impossibly fast, flying over the keys and wringing from them what sounds to him like pure sunlight, spinning it into a shimmering golden skein.

Abruptly the music stops as Hannibal draws his hands away, the lingering afternote of the last key still piercing the air in a haunting, melancholic echo. He murmurs something too quiet for Will to hear and then he's leaning forward, picking up the pen lying on the stand and scrawling out a few more notes onto the paper propped there.

A moment later he stiffens and then he's turning, catching sight of Will leaning against the doorway. He's panting slightly, as though he had just run a great distance.

"It's beautiful," Will says by way of greeting, stepping forward and towards him. "Practicing?"

"Composing," Hannibal says, tilting his head up to look at him as he moves closer, and his sweaty hair falls messily over his forehead. "Something I've been working on for a while."

"It's not done?" He sets a hand on Hannibal's shoulder, his palm dragging over the corded muscles in his back. He's warm and solid and real beneath Will's fingers, alive. A moment

later Hannibal's hand reaches up to cover his where it rests on his shoulder, their fingers lacing together.

"It's for you," he says.

"You're composing something for me?" He can hear the surprise in his own voice.

"Yes." He looks up, thumb tracing gently over Will's knuckles. "You are my muse in many more ways than one, *cuore mio.*"

He moves around the bench to sit beside Hannibal, his hand moving up to brush his hair out of his face. His eyes flutter shut at Will's touch, and he holds himself still as Will's fingers card gently through his hair, nails scraping lightly over his scalp.

"I was over at the police station earlier today," he says softly. Hannibal doesn't open his eyes, merely hums as Will's fingers continue their ministrations. "Did they try to guess what we made for dinner that night?"

"There was speculation. There always is, when it comes to you. There's a singularly morbid curiosity around you that refuses to die; every sounder of bodies is like the first. They want to know what you are, want to know your pathologies and your motivations more than they want to catch you."

"They will never have the honor."

"No. Nobody will," Will says easily, tightening his fingers ever so slightly in Hannibal's hair in a shadow of a teasing warning. "Nobody but me."

At that Hannibal smiles, his eyes still closed. Will almost expects him to start purring beneath the touch, curled around him like a particularly contented cat with its claws sheathed for the moment. If Will were to push a finger between his lips he would catch the edges of the fangs in his mouth, nicking the pads of his fingertips and drawing blood.

"No," Hannibal agrees. "Nobody but you."

He draws away a moment later, opening his eyes and allowing Will's hands to fall away from him. He reaches out, slowly pressing one of the harpsichord's keys down. It makes a high, sweet sound, reedy and sharp.

"My uncle would have preferred I learn to play the piano," he says as the note fades, seeming lost in thought as his fingers ghost over the keys, glancing over them but not quite touching them. "He thought it a nobler instrument, a cleaner one. He said he disliked the sound and feel of the harpsichord. Too harsh, he told me."

He presses down on another key, this one low and somber. "It was my first rebellion as his ward, disregarding his preference and learning the instrument that I wished to. He ensured I felt the consequence of that choice for weeks afterward, made sure I as well as my teacher saw it every time I lifted my hands to play."

Will says nothing, simply watches his hands splayed across the keys. Golden skin with traceries of veins like ravines running beneath, lightly scarred knuckles crowning long elegant fingers hovering perfectly still.

“He was a cruel man,” Hannibal goes on, turning to look at Will, “but he taught me many valuable lessons about nature and nurture. I came to realize a great many truths about myself that I may not have otherwise come to know if it were not for him.”

“Are you grateful for him, then?” Will reaches out, a finger slowly moving over the hard bulges of his knuckles. He imagines the wounds that must have blossomed there, starbursts of blood and torn skin that made every movement agony. “Even though he caused you pain?”

“Sometimes,” Hannibal admits. “On quieter days. Are you grateful for your father, Will?”

“I…” He hesitates for a moment too long. “I—yes. I am.”

Hannibal has caught the pause, pouncing on it; he can see it in the way his gaze sharpens, a camera lens blurring into focus sharp and abrupt. He glances upward, and Will looks away.

“Will,” is all he says, softly.

“I—not now.” He shuts his eyes, shaking his head. “There’s too many other things. There’s no time.”

“There is always time.” Hannibal shifts closer beside him on the bench, fingers gently tucking a wayward curl behind his ear. “But we needn’t speak of it now if you do not wish to. You said you were at the station today; is there any news of the Questura paying me a visit?”

Will clutches the olive branch gratefully, opening his eyes. “Yes. I spoke to Pazzi today, and he said that he would get a warrant by Friday. Knowing him, he’ll come the moment he’s allowed to. And he’ll bring backup, lots of it. He said he’d even bring people to test the meat right here, so that they can be sure immediately.”

“Friday,” Hannibal muses, lowering his hand. “We have four days, then.”

“To do what, exactly?”

“To clear out all the evidence in one fell swoop,” Hannibal says, drawing back, and now there’s a distinct glint in his eye.

Will raises a brow. “There’s a copious amount of evidence, Hannibal,” he says, and it’s almost a question. “It’s impossible for just the two of us to get rid of all of it before then.”

Hannibal is smiling now, his eyes gone entirely flat and glittering. There’s a whimsical sort of amusement there, the amusement of a predator confident in his strategy, knowing with ruthless certainty that the dance of the hunt can only end in his victory. He takes Will’s hand, pressing a chaste kiss to his fingers.

“Well, then,” he says. “I suppose I’m going to have to throw a dinner party.”

“Will,” Hannibal says, “may I show you something?”

Will glances up from where he’s surveying the wine cabinet, a bottle in each hand. He’s barefoot and jacketless, his sleeves rolled up and the first two buttons of his shirt undone. Hannibal takes a moment to savor the sight of him so relaxed and at home here in Hannibal’s kitchen, the heart of his home. He looks as though he belongs here, as though he’s lived here all his life.

They’ve been preparing for the dinner party tomorrow for the last few days; rearranging the furniture and bringing out the extra china, deciding what dishes to prepare, stocking and restocking the pantry. Will had been surprisingly taken with the idea of hosting what is sure to be an evening of shameless excess and sinful decadence, a pleased glint taking root in his eye when Hannibal had suggested it.

“Why not?” he had said, a small smile playing about his mouth. “Might as well end this charade with a farewell to remember.”

He sets the bottles down on the shelf now, making his way towards Hannibal. “What is it?”

Hannibal holds a hand out. “There is something I think it’s time you saw.”

Will takes his hand without a moment of hesitation or doubt, and when he turns wide, clear eyes up to look at him Hannibal sees only curiosity in them. “Okay,” he says. “Show me.”

Tightening his fingers on Will’s, he pulls him forward. “This way.”

He leads Will further into the pantry, towards the very back. Kneeling, he digs his nails into the loose floorboard and lifts it upward with the silent smoothness of hinges well-used and taken care of. Propping the hitherto-hidden trapdoor against the wall behind it he steps back, gesturing to Will at the set of steps that lead down into the waiting dark.

“After you,” he says.

Shooting him a quizzical look Will moves past him and towards the square opening in the floor, carefully descending the steps one by one. Hannibal follows, pulling the trapdoor closed behind him just as Will reaches the bottom and tugs on the cord that floods the room with light.

The basement is atypically rather bare, the air untainted by the thick iron stench of blood and the floors free of smears of the stuff, the massive operating table in the center bereft of an unconscious body waiting to be cut into and harvested. The surgical tools laid out on the smaller table beside it gleam beneath the lights, spotless.

Cuts of meat hang from chains nailed into the ceiling, speared on hooks to dry and age them to flavorful tenderness. On the other side of the room opposite them hangs a single plastic suit, clear and unblemished. Its function is unmistakable.

“Oh,” is all Will says.

He walks forward into the basement, looking around curiously at everything he sees. Hannibal follows at his heels, watching him carefully and clocking every movement, every expression, every involuntary little twitch. But Will is inscrutable, impenetrable; Hannibal can discern nothing, even as Will reaches out to trail a hand along the operating table.

He turns to Hannibal, frighteningly blank-faced. “So,” he says slowly, “this is where you do the butchering.”

“Yes, sometimes.” He loops his hands behind his back to keep from wringing them nervously, fingers knotting tightly together. “For convenience, it often serves a better place for me to take what I need. If I am pressed for time I do the needful wherever I am when I kill them, then bring what I need back here.”

Will says nothing, merely walking leisurely towards the far wall where the barrels of wine and beer are brewing, glancing down at them.

“And then you dissolve the rest of it in here?” he asks, tapping one of the barrels with a finger. “In the alcohol?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” He puts his hands in his pockets, giving the barrels one last appraising glance before moving towards the meat hanging from the ceiling. “Neat. Nothing goes to waste.”

He glances back at Hannibal over his shoulder, his eyebrows rising. “And nothing is left behind.”

“That is the idea, yes.”

“Neat,” Will says again, turning back towards the meat. “Fastidious. I would expect nothing less from you.”

Hannibal trails behind him, ever so slightly afraid now. Not a single person has come down here apart from him—willingly, at any rate. He’s never shown anybody this place, this

sanctum sanctorum of his design, his becoming. Has never shared it with anyone. And now he has shared it with Will, and Will is giving him *nothing*—

"Jack was right," he says finally, softly. He's looking up at the clear plastic suit, his face still entirely unreadable. "Whoever named you named you well."

He turns to Hannibal, and he's smiling now, slightly. "You really are a monster," he says. "Aren't you?"

"Yes," Hannibal says, unapologetic. He refuses to feel any remorse for being what he is, and he never intends to. "Are you afraid?"

Will's little smile widens. "What do you think?"

"I think you are just as much a monster as I," Hannibal says, stepping towards him. "You are simply too used to hiding it."

"Maybe," Will allows, tilting his head.

"You felt no fear when you saw this place," Hannibal says, "just as you felt no fear when you saw me. I asked you that night, what you felt when you saw yourself killing those boys, what it *made* you feel. What does this make you feel, Will?"

"It makes me feel *alive*," Will hisses, taking a step of his own forward, and the words send a shiver skittering down his spine. "I felt powerful when I saw myself killing those boys, just like I felt powerful when I killed Paolo. I'm not afraid of becoming you, Hannibal. Not anymore. What I'm becoming is something else entirely."

"Yes," Hannibal breathes. "It is."

"Is that what you wanted to hear?" He closes the distance between them in one last step, and they're standing nearly nose to nose now, Will's eyes narrowed to crescents of blue the color of a storm far out to sea. The same ire writhes there, the sky and the sea clashing in an eternal, primordial battle.

"I only want what is best for you, Will," he says.

Will laughs then, bitter and entirely humorless, his teeth a flash of white lightning. "Please. If you had your way I would be lying on this table with half my insides cooking in a roast upstairs."

"I told you that is no longer what I—"

"Yeah, well, it's not exactly something one can just forget about, Hannibal," Will snaps. "How do I know you're not going to change your mind and decide I'd suit you better on a plate instead of in your bed?"

"Do not make me regret bringing you down here, Will," he says, and his voice is cold, uninviting. "I have trusted no one else with all of myself, and I never will. I do not want to realize that trust has been misplaced."

“And *I* told *you* that no matter what, I would never turn you in,” Will says, and the words are almost a snarl. “I gave up everything for you.”

“And I gave up everything for you.”

“I guess that makes us even then,” Will says, a smirk twisting his mouth. “Doesn’t it?”

He says nothing.

“Why did you really bring me down here, Hannibal?” His eyes are locked unwaveringly on Hannibal’s, and it feels as though there’s a tether between them, binding their gazes together and making it impossible to look away. “And I’ve told you once before, don’t lie to me.”

“You know why,” Hannibal bites out.

“Yeah. I do.” He grins, and it’s more of a baring of his teeth, fierce and unflinching. “I know you, Hannibal. Better than I know myself. I know how much you want me to hunt with you, kill with you. And what better way to nudge me into doing it than showing me the lair itself?”

“And did it work?”

“You tell me.”

“You want this as much as I do,” Hannibal says. “You dream about it, about blood turned black beneath the moonlight and ragged bits of flesh caught between your teeth, of the thrill of the hunt and the savage pleasure of tearing into your quarry. You dream of what it might be like, to finally follow those urges you’ve kept down for so long. Cultivating them, as the inspirations they are.”

Abruptly Will steps back, fingers twitching into fists at his sides. His throat is working, his face flushed and his eyes bright, and Hannibal doesn’t think he’s ever been more beautiful.

He looks around, eyes devouring everything in the room, and now, *finally*, Hannibal can see what he had been trying so hard to hide. There’s naked desire there, raw unguarded longing. Seduced by all he sees, all he could be.

“Will,” he says softly.

“I can’t,” he says, and he sounds wretched, desperate. “I want to—God knows I want to, but I can’t.”

You can, and you will, Hannibal wants to say, but he swallows the words down. He knows that there is only so much longer Will can outrun his reckless desire for righteous violence, his need to save and protect and covet no matter the cost. He thinks of Rinaldo Pazzi and the bloody, brutal end that he is sure to meet at their hand, and despite its inevitability there is time yet for that day to come.

Nevertheless, Hannibal is patient.

“Very well,” he says instead, holding a hand out. A placatory gesture, as well as a reconciliatory one. “It’s as I said, Will—I do not want to make you do anything you don’t wish to.”

Will sighs, knocking Hannibal’s outstretched hand out of the way and stepping forward instead to wrap his arms around him, burying his face into Hannibal’s chest. After a brief moment of surprise he gathers Will up against him, resting his cheek against his curls and breathing him in. He smells of adrenaline and dog fur and wine.

“Thank you for showing me,” Will mumbles after a minute or so, his voice muffled, and Hannibal smiles even though he can’t see.

“I assure you, dear Will,” he says, “the pleasure was all mine.”

The police lights flash off the surface of the stream, blue and red and red and blue, its siren wailing deafeningly. The dog has long since stopped barking.

The detective’s hair is long and black and shiny, falling in sheets over her shoulders. When she looks at him, he can see everything she’s feeling, *feel* everything she’s feeling. Now that he’s done it once it’s all he can do. He’s helpless before it, one body against the sheer cruel power of the riptide that sweeps him savagely away. A slave to the mirrors in his own mind.

She’s telling him something. He unclenches his hands from above his ears.

“Run,” she’s saying. “Run as far away from here as you can, and don’t look back. It won’t be safe for you here anymore.”

He wants to gouge his own eyes out if only it would make him stop *seeing*—

She tells him he has a gift, that it’s too special and too precious, that people will take it and twist it into something terrible and monstrous if he stays. It’s the same thing his dad used to say.

“What about the dog?” he asks her, and she falters for a second.

“He’s dead,” she says, and she’s telling the truth. He can see it. For some reason it makes him trust her, knowing that she will not lie to him. “He can’t come.”

“Okay,” he says.

He stands up. His jeans are streaked with dirt and grass, stiff from the water. The detective barely comes till his shoulder. Somehow he had thought she was taller.

“Go,” she tells him.

“Can’t you at least tell me your name?”

She hesitates. “My name is Bev—”

The world splinters, fractures. Reforms. He is standing exactly where he is now five hours ago. He’s holding an armful of tiny little shoes. The dog is barking. The stream is free of blood.

“Will?” his father’s voice calls from inside the house. “Are you outside already? You said you’d wait for me.”

He’s shaking. He’s afraid that if he opens his mouth he’ll scream or he’ll throw up. But when he does open his mouth all that comes out is a weak, rattling wheeze.

“Will?” His dad steps outside. His face falls the moment he sees him, sorrow and regret tugging at his familiar, weathered face. He looks older than he is, Will’s dad. Poverty and the burden of survival had put more gray in his hair and more wrinkles on his face, but he’s still the handsomest man Will has ever known.

“Oh, Willy,” he says softly, sadly. “I really wish you hadn’t found out like this.”

He’d thought he died then. There’s a startling pain in the side of his head, and then everything goes black. Sometimes he wishes he had just died that day. But he hadn’t. Or maybe a part of him had, the part of him that was innocent and good and right.

What wakes up is none of those things. What wakes up is a monster.

There’s blood in the water. There’s blood everywhere, and he’s not sure if it’s real. When he drags himself to shore and collapses onto the grass he can taste it in his mouth, brine and copper. It’s vile. It’s delicious. He wants to throw it up; he wants to drown in it.

He closes his eyes, and when he wades into the stream its rapids turn red. He catches a dead body instead of a fish, and he knows that the last safe place in his mind will never be safe again.

“Oh Hannibal, this amuse-bouche smells positively divine!”

Hannibal smiles, dipping his chin in what, to anyone else, would seem like a modest gesture. Diffident. Humble, even. Will almost laughs. He can see straight through the shallow artifice and down to the empty contempt underneath, and it makes him more ravenous than any amount of delicacies could.

The party is as obnoxiously opulent as he had anticipated, if not even more so. Strangers from the topmost fringes of Florence’s social elite are seated at Hannibal’s magnificent dining table, every inch of its considerable surface laden with succulent dishes of every possible variety. Crystal glasses are filled with the rarest of vintages and the plates are hand-crafted from china so fine it’s translucent, their edges trimmed with gold.

Will is seated directly opposite Hannibal on the other end of the feast, both of them facing each other. He likes it, likes that upon first glance it is unclear, which one of them is sitting at the head of the table.

“Before we begin, you must all be warned,” Hannibal calls, drawing every eye to him. He’s standing at the front of the table, striking in his jet-black suit and blood-red tie, looking for all the world like the Devil himself come from Hell to play host to this bacchanal of sin. He smiles, his every word rich with amusement.

“Nothing here,” he says, “is vegetarian.”

There’s a low ripple of chuckles, and when Hannibal raises his glass in a toast, the feast begins.

Will takes a moment to pause and look around amidst the cacophony of cutlery clinking against the rim of plates and murmurs of conversation, fork and knife in hand. He watches velvet-gloved hands spangled with pearls and diamonds lift pieces of human flesh speared on the ends of their forks, watches them disappear into their waiting mouths. He watches them close their eyes in pleasure, watches them savor every bite before they swallow.

He feels a vaguely detached sort of disgusted amusement as he looks at them, all these people so content in their ignorance. Oblivious and yet complicit, uncaring of the consequence of their own privilege.

He raises his eyes to the other end of the table, and Hannibal is already looking back at him.

He's smiling, his eyes sparkling. He's practically radiant in the dimness, flushed and intoxicated with the lavished praise and admiration and envy of everyone in the room. He thrives off it, Will knows. Removed and above humanity he may be, yet he is possessed by the singular need to be adored, the need to be seen as *better*.

Will smiles back, raising his glass, and Hannibal mirrors the gesture a moment later.

To the misfortune of the pig, Will thinks, and drinks.

Later, once the last of the guests have left and the cleaning crew is moving methodically through the remnants of the party Will finds Hannibal on one of his sizable balconies, leaning against the rail with his jacket eschewed and a cigarette dangling loosely between his fingers. Will knocks on the windowpane, stepping onto the cool tile a moment later.

Hannibal turns his head, the corners of his eyes crinkling gently as he watches Will approach. "How was the food?"

"Delicious." He draws up to him, a hand reaching out to loosely encircle the cold railing. "Is it all gone?"

"Every last bit of it." He flicks a bit of ash over the edge of the rail and into the street below. "Detective Pazzi and the Questura will find only pork."

He smiles at Will's raised eyebrow, and amends, "Actual pork."

"Good." He tilts his face up to catch the tail end of a cool breeze, breathing the night air in deep. "I'll finally be showing Pazzi my hand—every last card. There will be no more pretense after tomorrow, no more question as to where my loyalties lie."

"Does the thought unnerve you?"

He thinks for a moment. "Not as much as I thought it would."

"Your design is evolving," Hannibal says, lifting the cigarette to his lips. The tip flares like an ember when he pulls in a mouthful of smoke, burnt orange in the dark. "Coming into its own, just as you are."

There's an easy silence for a while, both of them looking out over the glittering city laid out like a carpet beneath their feet. For a few moments it feels as though they are the only two people in the world, Achilles and Patroclus come to conquer Troy alone with eyes for nothing and no one but each other.

"Tomorrow," Will says softly, "they're going to tear this place apart."

Hannibal's smile is a slash in the dark, a shark's smile full of teeth and blood. "Good. Let them come," he says. "I await them eagerly."

"Hannibal Lecter," Detective Pazzi's familiar voice says the moment he opens the door, hard and furious, "this is a search warrant for your property. The Questura has received information that may implicate you in an ongoing investigation."

Vindictive satisfaction flashes in his eyes as he raises the sheet of paper clutched in his hand a moment later. Hannibal glances down at it, making out a word here and there—*seize* and *suspicion* and *detain*.

"Well," he says, looking up, "I suppose it would be counterproductive to ask you to come in, seeing as you have apparently invited yourselves in already."

"Get out of the way," he snaps, and then he's shoving inside, his entourage spilling in behind him a moment later. Hannibal allows himself to be pushed aside, saying nothing as the police officers fan out inside his apartment, Pazzi at their head as he barks out orders to start searching.

It's a long and painful thing, watching them tear his house apart.

It's seemingly endless, their search thorough and scrupulous. They move like a wake of vultures from one room to the next, ripping the whole thing to shreds before they move on, leaving behind only bones stripped bare of meat. Hannibal stays in their periphery, keeping his hands loose and unmoving at his sides as they rifle through cabinets and tear clothes from their hangers, emptying cupboards and upending drawers.

When they converge at last on the fridge, he bites the inside of his cheek hard to keep from smiling. Pazzi looks victorious already, sweat shining on his forehead and a manic sort of desperation crackling in his eyes like a lit fuse. Hannibal finds himself very much looking forward to watching it implode, moving closer as he throws the doors open.

"Test it," he orders, sweeping the neatly-wrapped meat inside onto the floor. "All of it. Now!"

There's a flurry of activity as they slit open the plastic and ready their DNA tests, laying everything out onto the dining table. Pazzi glances sideways at him, a smirk curling his mouth.

"I have you now," he says in a low voice, "Monster."

Hannibal merely looks back at him, wiping his face blank of any emotion. He senses rather than sees the uneasiness that suffuses him, and when he takes a step back and turns away Hannibal knows that watching the orchestrated spectacle of Pazzi's destruction will be all the more sweeter now.

They've been waiting for what feels like hours when one of the men standing at the table looks up and says, "It's pork, sir. Guanciale and Lardo."

"That's impossible," Pazzi snaps, striding forward and peering down at the vials littering the table. "Check again."

"We already checked thrice," the woman beside him says, a frown creasing her brows. The officers surrounding them exchange looks, and now there's hesitation in their faces when they turn back to Pazzi. "It's all clean."

"No," Pazzi growls, spinning and stalking towards Hannibal, and he's shaking with rage. He points a trembling finger into his face, and Hannibal can smell the fear rolling off him in sickening waves. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?" Hannibal asks calmly, and he snarls, snatching a fistful of his collar.

"The meat," he hisses. "The human meat, where is it?"

"You have the wrong man, Detective," Hannibal says, glancing down distastefully at Pazzi's hand fisted in his shirt. "Kindly unhand me, if you please."

"No!" He's still shaking, his eyes wild. He looks almost rabid, and everybody in the room is looking at him as though he's mad. "I know it's you, I *know*. You planned this, somehow you knew we were—"

He freezes suddenly, his next words dying before they can pass his lips. The realization is a tangible thing, rushing through him savage and unremorseful, and between one heartbeat and the next Hannibal is sure that he knows.

"Will Graham," he says under his breath, so softly nobody but Hannibal hears it. "He told you."

Hannibal says nothing.

"Detective Pazzi," says a calm voice from the doorway, "let go of him and step away. Put your hands behind your back."

Pazzi does as he's told, not looking away from Hannibal. He steps back, revealing the unfamiliar man standing behind him who had spoken. He's tall and imposing, his

authoritative presence filling the whole room. A man used to being listened to, Hannibal thinks. He imagines this is not a man particularly intimate with the concept of disobedience.

He turns to the other officers, nodding. “Escort the detective back to the station, please.”

The room empties in mere seconds, leaving Hannibal and the man alone in the kitchen. He glances around with a shake of his head, sighing.

“Well,” he says in English, and Hannibal realizes belatedly that he’s American. “I’m not sure who authorized this, it was kept securely within the walls of the Questura. But I imagine whatever the outcome, it won’t do any wonders for poor Detective Pazzi’s reputation.”

“I don’t imagine it will.”

“Well, whatever the case, I apologize that you were caught in the crossfire,” he says, making his way towards Hannibal. “This can’t have been convenient for you.”

“Not at all,” Hannibal says. “The police were merely doing their jobs, as were you.”

The man smiles, holding a hand out. “Jack Crawford.”

“Hannibal Lecter.” Jack’s grip is firm, his handshake brief and polite. Robertus had taught him that there was much you could glean from a handshake, that you could learn everything you needed to know about a man from the way he shook your hand. He would tell him Jack is a good man, he thinks, honest and honorable.

“Will has told me a great deal about you,” he says as Jack lets go, and Jack smiles again.

“That’s funny,” he says. “Will hasn’t mentioned you to me at all.”

“He does tend to err on the side of caution when it comes to divulging information about his life outside the halls of the Questura and the university,” Hannibal says. “I imagine it was a matter of professional as well as academic courtesy.”

“I would agree.” Jack looks down at the meat scattered across the dining table, his expression unreadable. “All this chaos and we’re no closer than we were before to catching Il Mostro.”

“I’m sure you will catch him eventually.”

“Me too.” He turns back towards Hannibal. “That, or he’ll just… stop one day. It’s happened before. He might get bored, or decide to go elsewhere. Already I can feel something changing.”

Intrigued, Hannibal asks, “What do you mean?”

“We’ve kept this little detail out of the papers,” Jack says, raising a brow, “but we have reason to believe that Il Mostro has fallen in love with somebody. And in love we take leave of our senses, we change. And he’s changed. I see it when I look at his crime scenes, and when Will tells me what he feels when he does.”

“So you believe that he is trying to stop because of his love?”

“Maybe not stop,” Jack allows, “but evolve.”

“Interesting,” Hannibal murmurs. “Very interesting.”

“Well, some of us have to do our jobs right.” He offers Hannibal one last smile. “I should get going, see what’s going on down at the station.”

“Of course.” He falls into step beside Jack as he walks towards the door, glancing around at the wreckage his house has become and feeling only a mild irritation. It is a small price to pay, for freedom.

“I would love to have you for dinner sometime,” he says as Jack turns to leave. “Both you and your wife, once I get the house in order again.”

“That’s very kind of you, Hannibal,” Jack says. “I guess neither of us have to be worried about what’s in the food.”

Hannibal smiles. “Not anymore, I hope.”

“Not anymore,” Jack agrees, and steps back and away. *“Buongiorno.”*

Then he’s gone, the tails of his coat disappearing down the steps. Hannibal watches him go, turning only when he hears the door close behind him and casting an appraising glance over what is left of his apartment. One more labor has been conquered, the others lying in wait. He is optimistic, that they will emerge victorious.

Stepping further into the disorder, Hannibal finally allows himself to breathe.

Out of breath, Will bursts into the entryway, his bag slipping off his shoulder. He had forgone taking the bus, unable to wait, and had simply run all the way to Hannibal’s apartment. He’s

beginning to regret it; he's gasping for air, and there's a nasty stitch beneath his ribs that feels as though someone is twisting a knife into the space there.

Jack is stepping into the foyer just as he comes in, seemingly unsurprised to see Will. He says nothing, merely tips his hat and steps past him, walking off into the burgeoning evening.

Allowing himself only a moment to pause and linger he takes the steps three at a time, wheeling onto the landing and jogging across that one last stretch of corridor between himself and Hannibal. He pushes the door open, stepping inside and dropping his bag on the floor with a thud.

The whole place is in shambles, torn apart just as he had thought it would be. The floor is scattered all over with paraphernalia, paper and pencils and keys and books, and short of overturning the couches everything has been taken apart. Hannibal is standing in the entryway in nothing but a plain button-down shirt and slacks, sleeves rolled up and hands in his pockets, looking around at the mess.

Will swallows hard. "Did they find anything?"

Hannibal turns to look at him, then shakes his head. "No. Nothing."

He exhales, running a hand through his hair. "Right. Good. That's that, then."

"Will," Hannibal says softly, and a moment he's moving, closing the distance between them in two strides. His arms are going around him and pulling him tight against his chest, and then he's kissing him.

All the breath rushes out of him in a sigh and he clutches Hannibal back, his hands clenching tight in the fabric of his shirt. He feels almost dizzy with relief, and it's only then that he realizes how much he had thought they might find something and take Hannibal away from him.

"You did this, Will," Hannibal is murmuring between kisses, his hands soft and reverent on Will's face. "You did this, you put an end to him all on your own."

He draws away, his eyes shining and his mouth flushed. Will is breathing hard, and he can feel his own blood rushing fast and restless through his veins, feel his pulse throbbing at his wrist, on his neck.

"It's not all over just yet," he says, and his voice is uneven but steady. "It'll only be over once he's dead."

Hannibal nods, his mouth curling upward in a smile as he pulls him closer again. "Yes, it will."

They simply stand like that awhile, entwined amidst the sea of chaos all around them. Will closes his eyes, at once moored to earth and lost at sea in Hannibal's arms, and he knows that if he could stop time and stay within the beating heart of this one moment for all eternity, then he would.

“I love you, Will,” Hannibal says softly, and he feels the words thrum along his ribs, curling between them as though they belong there. And they do, he knows. “Madly, and wholly.”

Will doesn’t open his eyes, resting his head on Hannibal’s chest and feeling his heart beating underneath, telling him that he is here, that he is his. “I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

do leave a comment telling me what you think, they keep me going. :)

Suoni la Sconcia Novella

Chapter Notes

> content warning for disturbing themes/imagery, mentions of domestic/sexual abuse and underage, and animal death. this one's a heavy one, folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“More wine?”

Hannibal leans forward in his chair, fingers encircling the elegant slender neck of the glass decanter and lifting it slightly. The vintage glimmering inside catches the firelight enticingly, plum-dark and rich in the dimness as he tilts it down over Bella’s half-empty glass and pours it carefully.

“I must confess to never having had wine this fine in my life,” she says with a smile as Hannibal withdraws, giving the decanter one last gentle shake to dislodge the last few drops clinging to its lip. They fall like rubies, each one perfect and tear-shaped before they vanish with a tiny ripple.

“An early harvest Beaujolais nouveau,” he says with a small smile, inclining his head. “And a rare one: it is a *vin de primeur*, fermented for only a few weeks before it is bottled and sold, always and only on the third Thursday of the eleventh month in Paris. I managed to procure this bottle last year, not without sufficient travail.”

“My compliments to the folks over in Beaujolais,” Bella says, lifting her glass and taking a sip. “Are those violets I catch a hint of?”

Hannibal beams at her, lifting his own glass. “Your palate is exquisite, Mrs. Crawford.”

“Just Bella, please,” she says with a laugh, waving a hand. “Let’s not be so formal.”

“Would that be Bella for Isabelle, or Annabelle?”

“Neither,” she says, glancing at her husband and raising a brow. “My name is Phyllis. Jack only calls me Phyllis when we disagree.”

“We were stationed in Livorno,” Jack says by way of explanation, gesturing with his fork. Fond remembrance lends an easy lilt to his smile, the easiness of a love that’s as fresh as it was ten years ago. “I was army, she was NATO staff. She would walk down the quays of the city in the sunset and the light would get caught in her hair, on her skin. A goddess in Navy fatigues.”

“Jack,” Bella laughs. “Please.”

“Small wonder then that all the Italian men would run after her half in love just from looking at her, calling her *bella, bella, bella.*” He cuts into the food on his plate, bringing the bite to his lips. “Well, I wanted her to be my Bella.”

“So, named Bella for your beauty.” There’s a strange, distant kind of look in Hannibal’s eye, as though he were somewhere far away. “That comes as no surprise.”

“And the two of you?” Bella takes another sip of wine, glancing between Hannibal and Will. “How did you both meet?”

“We found each other quite by accident,” Hannibal says, gently nudging Will’s knee underneath the table with his own, a sweetly affectionate gesture that only he is privy to. “We both simply happened to be in the right place at the right time, at the same time.”

“I actually met Hannibal the same day you first spoke to me about profiling Il Mostro,” Will says, holding Hannibal’s gaze for one moment longer before turning to Jack. “We were both admiring *Primavera*, albeit for different reasons.”

“Perhaps not all that different,” Hannibal murmurs.

“I remember. You were late to class that day,” Jack says, pointing his fork at Will. “Well, it seems we have Il Mostro di Firenze to thank for this dinner, then.”

“Oh?” Hannibal stills, going ever so slightly stiff. “How so?”

“Like it or not, he seems to be the common factor in all our meeting,” Jack says. “The point of intersection, in a way. He might have done unforgivable things, but if it weren’t for him we wouldn’t be here enjoying this wonderful meal. Remind me again what I’m putting in my mouth, Hannibal?”

“Salted and ash-baked celeriac with brown butter and foraged sel fou,” Hannibal says with a gracious bow of his head, the tense line of his shoulders loosening just the barest fraction. It would be invisible to anyone who isn’t watching closely enough, but Will catches it all the same.

“Preparing for this dinner was something of a test,” Hannibal goes on. “It’s extraordinarily rare that I make a meatless meal, though I had little choice on such short notice after the Questura’s raid rendered everything I had in the fridge unusable.”

“What a farce,” Jack says with a sigh, picking up his glass. “And a cataclysm for the Florentine Questura. It’ll take them years to overcome the ignominy of their misjudgment.”

“It would seem they were misled,” Hannibal says, his gaze flickering to Will and then away again. “Detective Pazzi—if he still retains that rank—insinuated that there was a witness, or someone along those lines who may have tipped them off.”

“Well, police should know better than to listen to hearsay,” Jack says dismissively. “Especially when the stakes are as high as they are for a case like this. This has set the

investigation back weeks, almost months. What happened will definitely make Il Mostro more cautious, more aware. We may never catch him now."

"Jack," Bella says softly, reaching out and putting a hand on his arm. "It's not all over yet, baby. You'll get him eventually."

"Yeah, let's hope." He covers her hand with his own, squeezing for a brief moment before he lets go. Will catches Hannibal's eyes lingering on the fleeting but intimate contact, the familiarity behind their closeness. Erosion, Will thinks, taking a sip of his wine. Water cutting paths through a surface as unyielding as stone, just through the power of sheer persistence.

"I think that would be the cue for dessert," Hannibal says, gracefully pushing his chair back and standing. He smooths his palms down the spotless front of his suit to rid it of any nonexistent wrinkles, then holds a hand out to Will. "Shall we?"

"Sure." He stands as well and takes it, allowing Hannibal to lead him into the kitchen. The flawless little tarts he had placed in the oven an hour ago are nearly finished baking, their edges crisped to golden perfection, and there's a neatly laid-out selection of cubed fruit and tempered chocolate in a glass jar set across the counter.

He turns to Hannibal. "Did you—"

He gets exactly two words out before he finds himself being pushed against the refrigerator door, his back hitting the cold steel surface and knocking the breath out of him. Hannibal is there before he can even gasp it in again, taking his face in his hands and kissing him as hungrily as though he would otherwise starve.

He's lost to it immediately, the near-desperate caresses of Hannibal's mouth and the tremors wracking his fingers as they clutch at him to bring him somehow, impossibly, closer. All he can do is give himself up, allow himself to be cracked open, devoured and savored.

Hannibal's tongue licks into his open mouth, leaving behind the lingering aftertaste of burnt bittersweetness, wine and balsamic and honey. His teeth follow soon after, sinking into his bottom lip and flooding his palate with the taste of blood, a salt-sweet remise en bouche that only leaves him aching for more.

He finally manages to drag in a sharp gasp of air when Hannibal's mouth tears away from his and presses a bruising line of kisses down his jaw and to his neck, sucking up sweetly stinging marks that he knows will bruise and stay imprinted on his skin for days afterward. He bites his tongue hard to keep from moaning, squeezing his eyes shut as his head falls back against the door behind him.

He feels Hannibal's knee wedge its way between both of his, pinning him more firmly against the fridge. The movement presses their hips together and this time he can't stop the strangled sound that scrapes past his throat at the torturous friction, realizing belatedly that he's half hard already—and so is Hannibal.

Seemingly unbothered by the fact that Jack and Bella are seated at the table not ten feet beyond the kitchen door Hannibal turns his face into the sweat-slicked curve of Will's throat

where the marks he had left there are already beginning to redden, his breath hot and erratic on his skin as he grinds his hips into Will's in short, shallow movements. Will clamps a hand over his mouth, biting into his palm as another cry threatens to escape.

"Hannibal," he rasps. "We need to—we have to stop—"

Hannibal doesn't answer, merely licks the sweat gathered on his skin and pushes him harder against the fridge. He feels his legs fall open wider reflexively at the hot, wet swipe of Hannibal's tongue on his neck, his back arching. It feels so good, so perfectly, exquisitely all-consuming.

He's almost painfully hard now, the seams of his trousers pulled uncomfortably tight. They're both going to finish in their pants if they keep this up, rutting against each other fully clothed and standing in the kitchen with one unlocked door between them and their dinner guests: Will's professor, technically his boss, and his wife.

He's about two seconds away from shoving Hannibal away from him when the oven announces that the tart shells are finished baking with a loud, piercing ring, making him jump. Hannibal steps back swiftly, breathing hard. His cheeks are flushed and his hair is mussed, his mouth swollen from kisses and the front of his suit now thoroughly crumpled. Will can't imagine how he himself must look, half-ravished and aching as he is, throat decorated with bruises and a livid cut throbbing on his lower lip.

"We should—" Will's voice is scratchy and hoarse, and he clears his throat. "We should get dessert. They'll be waiting."

Hannibal only nods, the line of his throat moving as he swallows hard. He turns a moment later, tugging at the hem of his jacket to straighten it as he moves towards the oven and pops the door open. Will trails behind him, tonguing the cut on his lip as he tucks his shirt back in and does his best to get rid of the wrinkles.

They prepare dessert in silence, piping chilled Chantilly cream into the warm, crisp tart shells and nestling a few pieces of fresh fruit into the soft peaks, drizzling the chocolate on top. They both take a plate in each hand and carry them to the table, murmuring apologies and excuses: the shells hadn't finished baking, the cream wasn't firm enough yet.

They say it's no trouble and then the next few minutes are quiet but for the clink of silverware against their plates and their soft sounds of appreciation at the tangy sweetness of the tart, citrus and vanilla. Will is worrying at his lip, relishing in the sweet sting as blood beads up at the gash there. He wonders how it tastes to Hannibal, wonders what wine he would pair with the salty, saccharine copper of it.

"I haven't had a home-cooked meal like that in a long, long time," Jack says as they fetch their coats, smiling at Hannibal. "Everything was very enjoyable."

"I'm glad to hear that," Hannibal says, sketching a short, polite bow. "Please do not hesitate to invite yourselves as often as you wish. You were both wonderful guests; perhaps I can procure some meat next time."

“Don’t be surprised if I take you up on that offer.” Jack turns to help Bella with her coat even though she rolls her eyes, his hands lingering fractionally on the curve of her throat where the neckline of her blouse slips down her shoulder. “It’s nice to not have to worry about what to cook and only about what to eat for a change.”

“I take it then that Bella is not the one who does the cooking.” He glances at her and she gives a rueful shrug. “I’m afraid not. Though I must admit I’m not particularly keen on meat.”

“Too rich?”

“Too cruel.”

Jack sighs. “Phyllis.”

“Jack,” she counters in the same tone, turning to him and raising an eyebrow.

“I have no taste for animal cruelty,” Hannibal says. “Which is why I employ an ethical butcher.”

Bella’s bemused little smile widens. “An ethical butcher? Be kind to animals and then eat them?”

“I’m afraid I insist on it. I take no pleasure in needless suffering.”

The blatant half-truth makes amusement tug at Will’s mouth, brimming just underneath and threatening to spill out; he has to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. Something about the particular nature of Hannibal’s words, picked like a careful forager checking each fruit before plucking it from its perch, is fascinating to watch.

“I insist on being present when I source my meat,” he goes on. “To ensure both quality as well as mercy. It is taxing, but ultimately supersedes convenience.”

“Eating is a pretty taxing job, too,” Will says, leaning against the wall. “As is the occasional mishap-filled attempt at helping in the kitchen.”

“Don’t I know it.” Bella smiles, looping her arm through her husband’s. “Well, it was lovely being here, gentlemen. I know I’ll be dreaming about that Beaujolais nouveau for months.”

“My door is always open to you both, as is my wine cabinet,” Hannibal says with a courteous duck of his head, holding the door open. “Have a good evening.”

The lock clicks with a gentle *snick* and Will moves down the entryway and drifts back towards the kitchen, reaching out and popping a neatly cut cube of kiwi into his mouth. It bursts between his teeth, tart and fresh.

Hannibal appears in the doorway a moment later, clearly having discarded his jacket somewhere on the way; he’s in only his waistcoat and dress shirt, rolling his sleeves up as he steps into the kitchen. Without a word they both take their places at the sink, falling easily into the routine they’ve built slowly over dozens of dinners.

After a few minutes of silently washing the dishes Hannibal says softly, “They are very in love.”

“Yes, they are.”

Hannibal hands him a clean plate, not looking at him. “Jack is a good man, Will.”

He takes the plate, starting to dry it. His voice is quiet, regretful. “Yes, he is.”

There’s a long, heavy silence, weighed down with a burden he knows was always going to be there but doesn’t want to bear. Unwilling to say what they both know must be said he looks stubbornly at the droplets of water sliding down the curve of the faucet, not meeting Hannibal’s eye.

“I do not wish to kill him,” Hannibal says finally, after the last dish is done. Will turns reluctantly to face him, a hand still gripping the edge of the counter to anchor himself, find some semblance of stability lest he go entirely unmoored. “And nor do you.”

“No,” Will agrees quietly.

“Then you realize what needs to happen now, Will.”

He does. He knows what they have to do, knows that it’s the only way they can escape the one last domino left to fall in the long, long line whose meticulous alignment has been the product of months. But he doesn’t want to admit it, doesn’t want to speak it into existence lest it solidify into reality, into unavoidability—and Hannibal knows it, knows it because he knows Will, and says it because he won’t.

“We have to disappear,” he says.

Will closes his eyes, dragging in a shaky breath. “Hannibal…”

“It is inevitable, Will.” He opens his eyes and Hannibal is looking back at him, brows creased and soapsuds clinging to his hands, so intensely, achingly *familiar* that he feels a swell of some sudden, unnamable emotion tear through him like an arrow.

“I know,” he says, and he feels almost helpless, adrift in the water with nothing to tether him to solid ground. “But I don’t want to.”

“We have no choice.” His hand reaches up, still damp from the water, and comes to rest on Will’s cheek. He leans into the touch, uncaring that soapsuds from Hannibal’s fingers are likely making their way onto his face, letting out a breath. “It has already been set into motion, and cannot be undone now.”

“There’s still time.” His fingers loosely encircle Hannibal’s wrist where his hand still lingers on his face, feeling his pulse thrumming beneath. He turns his face to press a kiss to Hannibal’s open palm, and feels his heartbeat give a quick, unsteady throb against his fingers.

“We can talk about this some other night,” he goes on, drawing away and tugging gently on Hannibal’s hand. “A night when you don’t kiss me like you kissed me tonight and then left

me wanting."

"I assure you I am just as irked that the oven's timer chose that precise moment to go off."

"I never did ask you why you did it." He quirks a brow. "The timing wasn't particularly convenient."

"Most people are not lucky enough to find even one great love in their lifetime," Hannibal says, his thumb tracing over Will's knuckles. "Jack and Bella are, and I was rather acutely reminded that I am as well."

"Sentimental," he ribs gently, pulling Hannibal in for a kiss. "Though you have quite the way of showing it."

"I told you," Hannibal breathes against his mouth, his voice so low it's almost a growl. "I greatly treasure all that belongs to me that I hold dear. And you are the loveliest and most precious of all my belongings, Will."

A shiver slides like cold fingers down his spine, an uneven breath escaping his lips. "Stake your claim, then."

Hannibal's lips curve up into a smile underneath his, arms moving to lift him up and carry him upstairs. "With pleasure," he purrs.

After, they lie side by side on top of Hannibal's scarlet satin bedsheets, the cold draft from the window Will had thrown open earlier cooling their sweat-heated skin. Neither asleep nor awake they merely drift awhile, in some faraway, intangible liminal space together. Unspooled in the wake of the afterglow, lost breath coming back slow and fractured awareness coming back slower.

They've been soaking in the intimacy of simply existing together for what feels to him like hours but is likely only half of one when Hannibal says softly, "Will?"

"Mmm?"

"Would you tell me why you killed your father?"

He opens his eyes, feeling himself stiffen, going rigid and still. There's silence, punctuated neither by Will speaking nor Hannibal rescinding his question, both locked in an uncomfortable stalemate that he knows he will lose. This has stretched too far and too thin, a rubber band pulled taut and tauter still until it has no choice but to snap and spring back.

Closing his eyes, he pulls in a steadying breath and tries to ready himself as much as he can to say the one thing he's never told anyone in his life, and had been so sure once that he never would.

"I was seventeen years old," he says.

It’s the day after graduation, and spring is beginning to burn up into what might be the hottest summer in years. Creeks dry up and the ground sprouts cracks, and the air always smells like something’s burning. The deafening din of cicadas clinging to the trees has become a familiar drone now, the way your ears get used to hearing the incessant wail of a siren after a while, only jolting once the noise stops.

He won’t miss school. It wasn’t especially difficult, but the particularity of its schedule and rigor had chafed, like an ill-fitting suit. Too tight in all the wrong places, restricting his every move. He didn’t have all that many friends, either.

He’s looking forward to the summer, sticky and sunbaked as it’ll be; he wants to be with his dad, wants to help him catch trout and repurpose the house and buy half-melted popsicles at the grocery store down the road, laughing as they try to lick away the rivulets of it that run down their wrists.

He doesn’t want to go to college, but his dad had insisted. *You’re a brilliant kid, Willy,* he had said. *You need a degree. It’s the only way you’ll get a good respectable job and get out of this town, make a name for yourself.*

But all Will wants is to stay here with him. He’s never imagined a life outside this place, and he doesn’t want to.

The day his entire life falls apart and everything shatters into a trillion pieces, a dog follows him home.

He’d spotted it on the side of the road near the gas station, snout buried in a puddle of oily, iridescent water and trying desperately to lap up every last drop. Its ribs show clearly through its fraying, matted fur, and there’s a chunk missing from one of its ears. It looks half-mad and starved, wild and desperate.

He spends the last bit of change at the bottom of his pockets on a packet of cheap bacon and a bottle of milk and sits cross-legged on the ground a few feet away from it, letting it decide to

approach him on its own.

Eventually, it does. He gently cards his fingers through the dirty fur at its neck as it snaps up the bacon as fast as it can, guzzling the milk he had poured into a used can. It yips happily once it's full and licks at his hand, and Will laughs and decides he's going to keep him.

"You look like a Buster," he tells him. "Do you feel like a Buster?"

He only yips again, his tail wagging so enthusiastically it looks like a blur of white and brown. And when Will starts to walk home, Buster follows him.

"My dad's going to love you," he says, glancing backwards and down at where Buster is nearly tripping over his own paws as he races at his heels. "We're going to take good care of you."

They arrive at the house, and when Will calls for his dad he gets no answer; he must still be at the convenience store where he works one of his three jobs, only getting off in the evening. He carries Buster into the backyard by the stream, near a secluded patch of earth where he never usually goes; he doesn't want Buster to get carried away by the currents as they tear through the riverbed, the rapids crashing deafeningly through their course. They're strong enough to rip a grown man off his feet.

Buster is seemingly full of boundless reserves of energy as he races in circles around Will, barking happily. Exhausted after a couple of hours of trying to keep up Will sits with his back against a tree, closing his eyes and leaning his head back, the balmy heat of the waning afternoon weighing his eyelids.

He jolts awake when Buster barks loudly and deposits something in his lap with a wet *plop*, sending clods of dirt flying everywhere. He sits expectantly on his haunches, tail swishing against the ground as Will stares down at it, uncomprehending.

It's a shoe. A little kid's shoe, barely the length of his hand. It's streaked liberally with dirt and what looks to him at first glance like rust, but he can see that it had once been a bright red, covered in a print of racecars.

"Buster," he says, uncertain, "where did you get this?"

Buster whines, jumping up and trotting towards where he had been running earlier in circles. Near the trees Will sees an upturned patch of dirt where he had evidently dug the shoe up from, a ways down into the topsoil. He stares down into it, nonplussed, then looks back at the shoe in his hand.

Five minutes later he's back in the yard, holding a shovel that he'd grabbed from the toolshed behind the house. Buster hovers around his ankles as he poises the blade over the ground near the trees, placing a foot on the edge and driving it down into the loamy earth.

He digs for what feels like days.

His palms blister almost immediately, bursting soon after and slicking his palms with blood. He ties rags around his hands and keeps going, undeterred, the sun beating down onto the back of his neck and making sweat run in rivers down his back.

Three hours later he's standing by the banks of the stream, the earth before him entirely overturned and the shovel with his bloody handprints smeared onto the handle tossed aside, holding heap upon heap of tiny little shoes.

He's gazing down at them, Buster whining at his feet and pawing at the ground, and it's then that he realizes that what he had thought was rust streaking their surfaces along with dirt is not rust at all.

Seized by a sudden and unidentifiable impulse, with the shoes in his arms and the destroyed earth laid out at his feet, Will closes his eyes. In the darkness beyond hangs a great golden pendulum, pulsing gently like a disembodied heart. Slowly, soundlessly, it swings backward.

And then he *sees*.

He sees himself, but he isn't himself at all. There is something inside him that is rotten, decayed, festering. It wraps its scaly claws around his heart, seizing it and refusing to unhand him until he satisfies it. It is hungry. It is *ravenous*. It wants to feed, and he has to feed it.

Nothing seems to sate its unslakable appetite, but they do. They're all so small, but if it devours enough of them then its hunger is satisfied for a time. Its ugly head only rears when he sees them, and he is but a slave to its bidding, its claws curled between his ribs. It's them or him, and it cannot be him. Because if he destroys himself to destroy what's inside him, then there will be nobody left to take care of his boy.

His boy, his beautiful little boy, with a heart so big that it swallows everything it sees. His antithesis, his redemption. He is wrong, but his boy is right. He has *this* inside him, this darkness, and his boy has pure light. He has to live, if only to do right by him.

And so he does the monster's work for it. He feeds it, and then he takes a little piece of them for himself, something that won't decay like their bodies do, and makes a graveyard in their memory. They are not keepsakes, not trophies. They are an apology.

This—this is his design.

When he opens his eyes, everything feels wrong. Forced back into his body he is too big for his own skin, bulging and stretching unnaturally around the sudden shift. His mind feels as though someone had torn it open, scooped out the insides and then sewed it back together, empty and sagging at the seams.

As if from a great distance, he hears Buster start to bark.

"Will?" his dad's voice calls.

He can't breathe. He's gasping for air, every inhale shallow and rattling. He thinks he may be going into shock, or having a panic attack.

“Are you outside already?” His dad’s voice is getting closer. “You said you’d wait for me!”

I’m going to die, Will thinks. It’s not a fear, not a sudden, random thought. It’s a certainty, an inevitability, a cold dread that spreads down the back of his neck and to his whole body.

“Will?” His dad steps outside. His eyes go wide behind their glasses as they take in everything before him—the ground by the stream completely dug up as if the earth had heaved and turned itself inside out, Will standing in front of it holding an armful of bloody little shoes and Buster standing squarely between them, stupid courageous dog that he is, ears flat and tail standing straight up as if to protect him.

“Oh, Willy,” he says, and he can see—he can *see*—a great, insurmountable regret stirring behind his eyes, feel it as though it’s happening inside him and not his dad. The mirrors in his brain have never done this for another person before, and now it’s happened for the first time and it’s a killer, and it’s his own *father*—

“I really wish you hadn’t found out like this,” he says, and then he lunges.

Time seems to slow, stretching out interminably. As if frozen he’s helpless but to watch, unable to move as his dad moves towards him, reaching for him as if to lash out. He hears Buster growl, sees him pounce, sees his dad drive his booted foot straight between those frangible, clearly-visible ribs.

Buster’s high, agonized whine makes pain lance through Will as though it were he that was kicked, his ribs that were cracked and not the dog’s. He makes a low, punched-out sound as Buster hits the ground hard, his little body lying broken and unmoving on the upturned earth.

Something connects with the side of his head, hard. There’s a sudden flash of pain like a firework going off inside his skull, and then everything goes black.

When he comes to, he’s in the water.

His vision comes into focus slowly, sluggishly. First he sees the rapids, strong and gleeful, cruel as they tug at his clothes with greedy fingers and laugh when he struggles against them. He sees his dad’s shadow behind him, feels him holding onto him tight, the way he used to when Will was little. Then he sees Buster’s bloody carcass on the riverbank.

“I love you,” his dad tells him, but Will hardly hears him. He’s standing limp in his grip, staring at where Buster’s body is lying. There’s blood everywhere, staining the grass the bright red of cherry syrup. Nausea roils in his gut.

“I love you, Will,” his dad says again, and he sounds wretched, desperate. “Don’t make me do this. Say you’ll forget. Say you’ll never think about it again, say you forgive me. We can leave. We can go far away from here, and we can forget any of this happened, I promise.”

Will feels himself start to shake, tremors wracking the length of his entire body. Tears spring to his eyes, blinding him and rendering the world in a smear of blue and green and red as despair rises like a tidal wave inside him, blotting out the sun.

“I can’t,” he says, and the words come out as a sob. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“I don’t have a choice,” his dad says, and Will can feel his tears dripping on his shoulders. “I never did. I love you, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Willy.”

Then, his hands as loving as they’ve always been, he forces Will’s head down under the water.

Seized by pure, animal instinct, Will explodes. He thrashes and fights, adrenaline flooding into his blood as a single, unequivocal thought rises above everything else, driving his body to sheer wild desperation: *I do not want to die.*

He kicks backwards, and his heel connects with his dad’s knee, hard enough for him to hear a crack even through the water. His dad cries out, his grip loosening fractionally; and that’s all it takes. Will wrests himself free, scratching and clawing and biting, and throws himself at his father.

Weakened and wracked with guilt and remorse as he is his dad doesn’t fight back, doesn’t even lift a hand to defend himself as Will tackles him, sending them both splashing into the rapids. Fingers clenched tight in the fabric of his dad’s jacket he uses it as leverage to flip himself over, digging his heels into the riverbed.

They skid another few feet and then his whole body jolts as he finds a foothold, coming to a sudden, jerking halt. He struggles to his feet, blind with tears as he holds his dad underneath the surface of the stream, water running in rivulets from his hair, gilded by the setting sun and turning to rivers of fire on his skin.

He isn’t sure when his dad dies. He never thrashed, never cried out or fought back, didn’t once try to wrench himself free. He simply allowed Will to hold him down, allowed his own son to kill him.

He’s been standing in the water holding his dad’s body for an eternity when time starts back up again, rushing back around him from where panic and shock and disbelief had dammed them. He’s in the stream. The dog is dead. He killed his own father, and he’s still holding onto his bloated, mangled corpse.

With a cry that feels like it tears his throat he lets go and stumbles backward, fetching up on the banks beside Buster’s body. Unmoored, his father is carried away by the current, disappearing along with the rapids and out of sight.

The inside of his mind is torn, mangled and bloody. Open wounds festering with infection, scoring his memory and spreading its rot to his entire body, his entire being. He sits there on the banks of the stream that had once been the only place he felt safe and is now tainted and ruined forever, cold and blank and empty, and he dies.

“I died that day,” he tells Hannibal. His throat feels raw from talking, and memory burns in his eyes like tears. “Some part of me, the last part that was good and right. The cops showed up eventually, found me sitting there. They’d found my dad’s body, traced it back to the house. They saw what had happened, saw Buster and the shoes, saw me and figured out that he was the one behind all the missing kid cases. He was dead, but the parents would still want blood. They would want mine.”

He closes his eyes, lets out a breath. “There was a detective who told me they were going to name me as my dad’s accomplice, throw me in prison in his place. Make me atone for his crimes. But they didn’t have evidence. She said I had a gift, that they’d find out about it and twist it until it broke, until I broke. She told me to run, told me she would make sure nothing would happen to me. She got me my passport and a plane ticket, her own that she’d been saving up for for years. She told me to leave, because she wanted to help me.”

“Did you ever learn her name?” Hannibal asks softly, the first thing he’s said since Will had started talking.

“She said her name was…” He tries to remember, but it’s yellowed and faded, a memory so thoroughly abandoned that it now simply ceases to exist. “I can’t remember. I asked her, I remember asking her, but it’s gone now. But she saved my life. She’s the reason I’m here.”

He shakes his head, seeing the stream behind his closed eyes. “There are so many things I don’t remember, so many things I’ve just… made up to try and forget, replace bad memories with better ones. I tried to make myself believe that my dad died suddenly at the end of the school year, that I sold the house and got the money he left me in his will. That I bought a plane ticket and came to Italy on a whim.”

“And you did believe it, for a time.”

“I did. I wanted to believe it so badly. But the memories started coming back, trickling in through the cracks. I started to get nightmares, flashes of the truth buried in the back of my mind.”

“What prompted their reappearance?”

“You,” Will says. “What you made me do. Falling in love with you. It all—coalesced. Became unavoidable. I was forced to confront the truth of what I’d done, to watch memories I had drowned and buried come floating back up to the surface like bloated corpses resurfacing when the bayou rises.”

He opens his eyes, and Hannibal is looking back. “I’ve only ever loved two people in this world,” he says. “My dad, and you. I still love my dad, even now, after everything that’s happened. I’ve long since stopped asking myself if it’s wrong to love him, just like I’ve long since stopped asking myself if it’s wrong to love you.”

He laughs then, and it’s a bitter, humorless sound. “The only two people I’ve ever loved, and they’re both killers.”

“One could say the same of you.”

“Yeah.” He scoffs. “Like calls to like, huh?”

“Your hunger for cruelty comes from your empathy,” Hannibal says. “A lust for righteous violence, to relish in the feeling of doing bad things to bad people because it makes you feel good. Your morality curbs your instincts, and even your heart of darkness has a vein of light running through.”

“I…” He swallows past the tightness in his throat. “I didn’t want to do it, but after I did there was no guilt, no remorse. It disgusted me more than the act itself.”

“You must be grateful to your father, Will,” Hannibal says. “He loved you, and his death was the first step in a wondrous transformation, a becoming whose final stage will be a monstrous beauty to behold.”

“He was… so kind. So gentle. Even when he killed all those kids, he never meant to hurt them. He was as loving with them as he was with me.”

“When men become killers their minds undergo biochemical changes, that alters states of consciousness that can change the way they think,” Hannibal says. “The same happens when they become fathers. Fathers can be killers, and killers can be fathers.”

“What about your father?”

“My father was no killer.” Hannibal’s smile is a mere twist of his mouth. “An unremarkable man. Kind, but unremarkable. I have been a father in this lifetime, though it was to my sister and not any child of my own.”

“Was?”

“She’s dead,” Hannibal says. His voice is soft, heavy with grief, but Will can see something stirring behind his eyes, a howling void that cries out in anger and despair.

“Why…” Will’s voice is quiet, barely above a whisper. “Why did you eat her?”

Hannibal looks down and away, the line of his jaw tautening. “It was not my choice, I assure you.”

“Tell me what happened to you.”

Hannibal smiles then, sadly. “Nothing happened to me,” he says. “I happened.”

“Tell me,” he insists. “Quid pro quo, Hannibal. You said it yourself.”

“So I did.” He looks pensive, far away. Over flatlands and mountains and forests, back to the cold, barren land of his childhood. It’s frigid and desolate there, lifeless and loveless, and bad memories lurk like monsters between the trees. They remember, even if he doesn’t.

“I come from a long line of noblemen, Counts in the Lithuanian royalty,” he begins, his voice flat and distant. “My father was the descendant of a great warlord of legend, and my mother was the daughter of a family that had once ruled Milan in the height of the Renaissance. As it was, their influence stretched far and wide, as did their wealth. Small wonder then, that their murder was over a matter of politics and personal gain.

“My sister and I, both still children at the time, were forced to take care of each other in the absence of our parents. Being her older brother, the brunt of that responsibility fell on my shoulders, though I was only eight at the time.”

“What was her name?” Will asks softly. “Your sister’s.”

“Mischa,” Hannibal says, and even now, after so many years there’s still raw pain in his voice, the pain of having someone taken from you far too quickly and far too cruelly. “She was a fragile, delicate little girl, with hair like spun starlight and eyes the green of forest moss. Too frail, too young. We were easy targets, and so it was not long before we were found and taken, with our captors under the impression that our parents were still alive so that they may hold us for ransom.

“It was cold, cruel winter that year, and food was scarcer than it had ever been. We were held in a crumbling prison for what felt to me like years, though it was likely mere weeks. We were given barely any food and water and were held in separate cells, though we could hear each other. And so we talked, every minute of every day, as though the other’s voice was the only thing that kept us sane. And it felt that way, for a time. Until one day, Mischa fell silent.”

Hannibal’s eyes are unfocused, dark and fathomless as they stare at something Will can’t see. “Thinking her disillusioned and tired I continued to speak as though she was still listening, hoping that she was listening, so that she might find her way out of whatever darkness she had descended into and back to me. Her silence did not deter me; I talked to no one for days on end, through sparse meals of meat and peas and freezing nights with nothing but a rag to keep me warm.

“Eventually one of our captors in a moment of careless complacence left a metal fork on my plate when he brought me food. I hid it away, and used it to pick the lock on my door. When I went to do the same for Mischa’s, I saw that her cell was empty. Half-mad and starved, my

body and spirit abused and near-broken I made to run away, to find her somewhere in the camp. I was caught, of course, by one of the guards by the entrance to the prison, but rather than trying to kill me he merely laughed and let me go. But not before he told me what had become of my beloved Mischa."

"They ate her," Will realizes quietly.

"And fed some of her remains to me," Hannibal says, and the ugliness of the words is only made worse by the emotionlessness in his voice. "The revelation shattered me. I felt as though I had lost what little sanity I had left, and when I ran, it was with no destination in mind but to wherever Mischa was. I wanted only death.

"Once again, however, it seemed cruel fate had other plans for me. I was picked up and identified, and sent back to my home. It had been converted into an orphanage, and so I stayed there with all the other unwanted boys and girls, where I first learned my distaste for discourtesy and my contempt for God. The trauma of Mischa's death had rendered me temporarily mute, and I did not speak a word until five years later, when my uncle Robertus and his wife the Lady Murasaki found and adopted me at the age of thirteen.

"They took me to Paris, where they lived. My uncle was cruel and cold, and wielded a cane to discipline me as often as he saw fit. He treated his wife much the same, and though she never spoke of it I knew he hurt her in other, worse ways. Her porcelain skin bruised easily, and by the time I was fourteen I was intimate with the sound of her cries. I and her handmaiden, a quiet but intelligent young girl named Chiyoh who I befriended quickly, were her only confidants. She would speak often of running away, just the three of us, fleeing back to Japan to make a new life for ourselves. She never followed through with her plans, of course, but it was in these moments that I saw my aunt for who she truly was—a beautiful noblewoman of grace, kindness and strength—and I fell madly in love."

Will can't help the little squeak that escapes him. "You fell in love with your *aunt*?"

"I was but a child," Hannibal reminds him, but now he's smiling ever so slightly, the barest tilt of his lips. "She was the only one in my new life who treated me with any compassion. To this day I am still unsure which one of us seduced the other, but it was not long before we began an affair.

"We were quiet, of course, and discreet. Nobody knew of our trysts, not even Chiyoh. I would get paranoid, angry, at the fresh bruises and cuts that would mar Murasaki's skin when she came to me, and though she would assure me Robertus did not know of us I knew that as long as he was alive, there was no way for us to be together in our entirety."

"So you killed him," Will says.

"Yes. I cut him open while he slept, gouged out his eyes and carved words of hatred into his chest. I flayed him apart, castrated him and then presented his mangled body to Murasaki, gave it to her as a gift. I was sixteen years old."

"Oh," Will says, and it feels as though someone has crushed all the breath from his lungs. "Oh my God."

“Murasaki was horrified,” Hannibal says. “She went quite mad at the sight of him, screaming and sobbing. She sent me off to boarding school the very next day, unable to bear the sight of me. I could see that she was afraid of me, terrified of what I was. She saw me, truly saw me as no one else ever had, but what she saw frightened her beyond belief. And so she sent me away, and ceased all contact with me. I never returned to their home in Paris, not even three years ago when I received a letter from Chiyoh telling me she had taken ill and died suddenly.”

Will reaches out then, placing an impossibly gentle hand on his face. “You do now what was done to your Mischa,” he says. “But she does not quantify you, Hannibal, what you do. What you are now.”

“Perhaps. But I do now willingly what I once did without my knowledge. There is power in that.”

“Did you ever think about eating your aunt?”

“Murasaki was my first love,” Hannibal says. “I learned what passion could be because of her, learned that there are certain people for whom you would do anything, anything at all. And I learned that there are those people who you dream of sinking your teeth into not out of contempt but out of a desire to consume, to make them a part of you so intrinsically that you are conjoined molecularly, in the most deep-rooted way possible. But in the end, she did not want me, and cast me aside just as everyone else did.”

He looks at Will, and there’s an incandescent sort of sorrow in his eyes. “You are the only one who ever saw me,” he says, “and loved me anyway.”

Slowly Will reaches out and takes his hand, their fingers threading together. They say nothing, both merely looking at each other between the scant space that separates them where they lie facing each other. Two monsters flayed open before one another, entrails spilling out and vulnerabilities entirely exposed.

And instead of attacking, instead of taking advantage of their mutual weakness they come together slow but sure, closing the distance between them, the tide and the beach forever faithful to no one else. Safer than they’ve ever been anywhere else they lie willingly in the cage of each other’s arms, and with that wordless understanding filling the breath between them, they keep their silence.

Chapter End Notes

re: the utter insanity of hannibal's backstory, take it up with thomas harris. be that as it may canon is my sandbox and i am an enthusiastic and overzealous three-year-old with a shovel and a dream.

Fuggirem L' Imaginata Caccia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Tell me we're closer than we were before to catching him," Jack says.

Will looks away with a sigh, hands clenched into fists where he's stuffed them into the pockets of his coat. The fabric is soft and lush, cutting the chill of the winter air. Wool or cashmere—he isn't sure which. It had been a gift from Hannibal, one among many.

They're all cut in severe but sensual lines that sweep up the length of his body, elegant and tailored to sheer perfection. He's never been particularly finicky when it comes to his clothes, but he likes the silky, liquid feel of these against his skin, likes that it's Hannibal who chose them, everything about them; the color and the cut and the fit, the way they cling to his frame like a lover's adoring hands. Likes the way he looks at Will when he wears them, like he's been starving for centuries and Will is the only thing that can sate him.

"We're closer," he says, nails biting into his palms. "You'll catch Il Mostro eventually, Jack."

"Yeah, well, I want to catch him now."

Will says nothing, glancing up the street where the police are gathered, the incessant buzz of their activity as they seethe around the crime scene like a swarm of wasps surging through the narrow space. The beginnings of a gathering storm bloat the sky, humidity pulsing in the air like a heart. The last remnants of the day's warmth take heaving, rattling breaths as moisture swells underneath it, heavy clouds bulging overhead.

Will's eyes skip over the faces in the crowd choking the road, searching and almost expecting to see a familiar crow-faced visage shadowed by the brim of a hat, piercing eyes locking on his and filling with rage and betrayal so strong it suffocates him—but he's not there.

Will swallows down the unease clawing its way up his throat, turning back to Jack. "When can I go in?"

"Soon." Jack glances at his watch, then up at the sky. "Storm's brewing."

The words are punctuated by a low, lingering rumble of thunder, almost as if on cue. The sharp, acrid scent of ozone and oncoming rain colors the air, sour and biting. Will drags it in, feeling it settle heady and tinged with chill in his lungs.

"How is it?" he asks. "This sounder."

"About the same as all the others." Jack casts a lingering look up the road. "Two bodies this time, laid out like a painting, organs taken. We're not sure which ones yet."

Hearts, Will thinks. *He took their hearts.*

“It’s his first kill after the false alarm,” Will says. “Is anything… different?”

“Not that I could see.” Jack shakes his head with a sigh. “I don’t even know what—or who—we’re looking for anymore. He’s a man, a psychopath, a sadist. Likely above the age of twenty-five or thirty, likely native to Florence, likely is or was a surgeon. It’s riddled with maybes, made up of only probability and guesswork. Nothing solid, nothing substantial.”

“It’s enough to catch him,” Will says. “We know more than that, Jack. We know the way he thinks, the way he chooses his victims, the nature of his pathology.”

“I asked you once, what Il Mostro feels like to you,” Jack says, his voice soft and barely carrying over the cacophony thickening the air. “You told me he feels like a mirror, a twisted mirror through which you can see your own distorted reflection looking back.”

He turns to Will, and there’s something Will can’t quite name blazing in his face. “That was then. Has anything changed? How does he feel to you now?”

Will hesitates. He thinks of Hannibal in all his mercurial, incongruous poetry, thinks of how his hands, always so still and motionless, shake when they touch him, how his eyes so empty and devoid of feeling shine with devotion when they look at him. Thinks of the taste of his blood, the way he says Will’s name, the way his lips feel against his.

“It has changed,” he says finally. “He’s changed, too. And so have I. His design is closing up, slowly, like a healing wound. Soon there’ll be nothing left but skin.”

“And then?”

“Then…” He shrugs. “He’ll disappear, for a time. He may decide to return, or he may tire of this cat-and-mouse game he played with the Questura entirely. He may even resurface as another killer, with another design. An intelligent psychopath, particularly a sadist, is very hard to catch. There’s no traceable motive, no visible patterns. He may never kill this way again.”

“So we may never catch him?” Jack shakes his head. “That doesn’t help, Will.”

“It was always a possibility,” Will says. “He’s too careful, too fastidious. He doesn’t leave evidence behind, Jack. He eats it. Catch a fish once and it gets away, you’ll find it’s a lot harder to catch a second time.”

“What about the person he’s fallen in love with? Do they know? Do they kill with him?”

“Oh, they know.” Will feels his mouth twist into a grim smile. “But no, they don’t kill with him. Not yet, at any rate.”

“So we could well be looking for two psychopaths, two killers,” Jack says, a furrow appearing between his brows. “Or we will be, soon.”

“Two monsters,” Will says softly. “*Folie à deux*.”

“Signor?” One of the police officers steps towards him and gestures down the street, the wind teasing strands of auburn from the knot in her hair and across her face. “They are finished with the bodies.”

He turns to Jack as he leaves. It’s finally begun raining, a fine drizzle that cuts through the stifling stillness of the air and slices at his exposed cheeks like blades of ice. Despite the cold, he finds he hardly feels it.

“Trust me,” he says. “Whatever happens, whatever comes next, this will come to end. One way or another, it will come to an end.”

“For all our sakes, I hope so,” is the last thing he hears before he turns away, walking towards where the bodies are hidden. The street is clearer now, quieter; he can hear the distant sounds of traffic, hear the rain as it patters onto the cobbles like footsteps.

He steps around the white canvas, eyes taking in the tableau before him. The dead man and woman are arranged side by side, the woman holding what looks to him like an arrow turned inward, pointed to her own breast. The man’s arms are held out to her beseechingly, one hand encircling her wrist almost as if to stop her.

It takes Will a moment to place the familiarity of it, to register the particularness of its significance before he realizes what exactly he’s looking at. Understanding follows on swift wings, rushing through him sudden and entire.

Will can’t help himself; he starts to laugh.

“Rinaldo e Armida,” he says. “Cesare Dandini. It’s almost as if he’s mocking him—or he’s mocking us.”

“Il Mostro certainly has a macabre sense of humor.” Jack doesn’t look remotely amused as he scowls at the two bodies draped in red and blue silks in front of them. Their eyes are gouged out, gaping holes in their faces that stare sightlessly up at the sky. They run with water and

overflow as the rain sluices down, like bloody tears dripping down their faces. “I take it he read the papers, then.”

“Psychopaths are narcissists,” Will murmurs. “They love to read about themselves, read what people are saying about them and what they’re doing.” The words are an echo of what Pazzi had told him so long ago, at that very first crime scene. He had known so little then, had understood even less.

“He read about what happened with Pazzi and Hannibal, then,” Jack says. “I’m sure he followed what happened after with just as much interest.”

“Evidently.”

“So he finds out Rinaldo Pazzi took the fall for what happened and lost his rank and his reputation because of him while he’s still free and uncaught, and decides to show his gratitude the only way he knows how.”

“Oh, no. This isn’t gratitude,” Will says. “Il Mostro’s gratitude is a rare thing, a priceless bottle of wine only brought out for special occasions. He reserves it only for those he deems worthy of it, and Pazzi is anything but.” He neglects to mention he had gotten a hearty taste of that very gratitude just last night, Hannibal’s hands on him cold from the night air and still smelling of fresh blood.

“So what is this, then?”

“This is…” Will sucks on his teeth, as if to taste the words before he says them. “This is a taunt. An acknowledgment and a defamation in equal measure; like the opposite of waving a white flag. It’s a declaration of his intent.”

“And what exactly is it that he intend to do?”

“What Pazzi did,” Will says, “thinking Hannibal to be Il Mostro and believing it to the extent that all this happened because of it—he’d consider it… discourteous. And discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to him. This is far from over. Whatever the Monster has planned, Pazzi will definitely be a part of it. He’ll be the main spectacle, the centerpiece in the grand culmination of his design.”

He glances sideways at Jack. “I’m sure he considers Hannibal rude, too. For being accused of being him, for daring to be believed to be him. He is the only one of whatever he is, and nobody can ever emulate him.”

“So he’s not done,” Jack says slowly.

“No.” Will’s eyes find the incision in the dead man’s chest, directly over his heart. Beneath it there is only emptiness where the organ had once pulsed, removed now. He wonders as he looks at where the scalpel had cut clean and precise into his skin, what he and Hannibal will cook with it. “He’s not.”

“Something to look forward to, then,” Jack says grimly, already beginning to turn away. “I’ll ask the Questura to send some extra security over to your and Hannibal’s houses in case the two of you get any visitors in the next few weeks.”

Will watches him go, standing beside the two bodies with the rain still coming down. Sunk deep into the well of his own mind it’s only after the forensics begin to take the scene apart and hoist the bodies onto stretchers that he returns to himself, backing away from them so quickly he nearly slips on the spreading pool of rainwater that had blossomed around where the bodies had lain, tinged with red.

He turns, hardly looking where he’s going, and leaves the crime scene behind, fighting down the rising tide of guilt and disquiet in his chest. He doesn’t know how many more bodies he can look at, how many more people he can see lying dead and torn open while knowing exactly what happened to them. How many more times he can tell the same lie.

Trusting the long walk to clear his head he walks back home, head down against the rain. Florence is beautiful when her streets are soaked and glistening, a curtain of droplets hanging in the air and lingering as if suspended midmotion in the soft gold light of the lamps that line the roads. Undeterred by the storm the streets remain as crowded as ever, a multicolored barrage of raincoats and umbrellas and gum boots moving like a current through the streets.

Will ducks through alleys and tapering, crooked lanes so narrow the cool brick on either side brush his shoulders as he walks, moving through roads both familiar and unfamiliar. Even now he can’t help but marvel at Florence’s antiquated beauty, this city that has looked the same for hundreds of years and will look the same for a hundred more, as mesmerized by it all as he was four years ago.

He’s going to miss her, this flighty temptress of a city in all her capricious whimsy and fits of unpredictable anger, her crumbling facades like testaments to some ancient, bygone epoch that stretches underneath its modernity like a second skin. He had come here an empty chalice, hollow and echoing, and she had filled him till he overflowed.

But he has overstayed his welcome, he knows that much. He has been on bartered time, ever since that night in the gallery when he had chosen Hannibal; every moment since has been borrowed. He had struck a Faustian bargain with fate and chance, and now it is time for him to pay his dues.

He’s thoroughly soaked through by the time he slams his squat little building’s front door shut behind him, his coat already beginning to drip a sizable puddle on the cracked floors. He shakes his hair out, feeling cold droplets spatter on the walls and drip down the back of his neck.

“Look at you, shaking water from your hair like a dog,” Emiliano’s voice says from where his front door has opened, a bemused smile on his weathered face. “Even Winston has better manners than you.”

“It’s raining,” Will mutters rather unnecessarily, running his fingers through his damp hair. “I didn’t have an umbrella.”

“You’ll catch a cold,” Emiliano says reproachfully, stepping forward and putting a hand on his forehead. “You’re still just a slip of a boy, Guglielmo. Too skinny in the wrists and the hips.”

“I’ll be fine,” Will says, though he holds himself still as Emiliano tries to wipe the rainwater that’s still dripping down his face. “It’s not very cold outside.”

“And you’ve ruined your lovely coat as well,” Emiliano tuts, hands finding the damp fabric that rests like a weight on his back. “It will take days to dry.”

Will grins at him. “That’s okay. Hannibal will buy me another one.”

“Hannibal would pluck the sun from its perch in the sky and lay it at your feet if you asked him to,” Emiliano says. “It is not about what he is willing to give you, but rather what you are willing to do with it.”

“Emiliano, please,” he groans. “Spare me the lecture.”

“Nobody else will go to the trouble,” Emiliano says. “Someone must.”

“Then do it when I’m not freezing cold and dripping all over your floor,” he says. “At least let me change into dry clothes before you start blathering.”

“Go on, then,” Emiliano says with a final pat to his cheek. “But remember to be on time for dinner. And don’t wake the whole street this time.”

When Will turns back from where he’s beginning to climb the steps with a quizzical brow raised, Emiliano merely smiles artlessly and says, “Hannibal is upstairs.”

Heat rises to his cheeks in a searing flood and he mutters something unintelligible, turning and stomping his way up the rest of the steps. The soft sound of Emiliano’s laughter follows him, cutting off when he steps into his flat and shuts the door.

“You’re very wet,” Hannibal says by way of greeting from where he’s sprawled elegantly across Will’s bed, one of his legs bent up underneath him. He turns his head from where he was reading one of his books, a small smile playing about his mouth.

“If you heard my conversation with Emiliano, no you didn’t.” Will starts to strip his wet coat off, rolling his shoulders before tossing it onto the chair to dry. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

Hannibal sets the book onto the bedside table and rolls gracefully to his feet, stretching his arms above his head languorously as he steps toward Will. The hem of his shirt rides up the flat, smooth expanse of his stomach and Will doesn’t bother hiding the way his eyes cling to the light dusting of hair there that arrows downward, disappearing beneath the waistband of the slacks hanging low on his hips.

He grins at Will, preening beneath the attention. “I thought I would surprise you, darling Will.”

“Oh, yeah?” Will starts to unbutton his shirt, bemusement tugging at his mouth. “Any particular reason why?”

“I presume the Questura discovered my communiqué.” Hannibal steps up in front of him, holding a hand out. Will hands him his damp shirt, moving to unbuckle his belt. “They did.”

“And?”

Will only shrugs, stripping his trousers off and stooping to pick them up, hanging them next to his coat. “Nobody found it particularly amusing.”

“Did you?” Hannibal asks softly.

He turns away without replying, rummaging in his cupboard for a fresh pair of clothes. “It was audacious, Hannibal. Cocky. Nobody likes a show-off.”

“You do,” Hannibal murmurs from behind him—*right* behind him. One of his hands snakes out, comes to rest on Will’s bare hip, thumb tracing slow circles on the damp skin. His mouth follows, pressing a wet, openmouthed kiss to the curve of his neck. Will senses rather than feels the slow, deep inhale as he noses the skin just below his ear, his sigh of pleasure thrumming through his chest where it brushes Will’s back with every breath.

“Hannibal,” he mutters, even as his eyes flutter half-closed and his head tilts unconsciously to the side, seeking more contact. “Not now.”

“No?” The word is half a breath, hot and sweet where it’s whispered against the pulse in his throat. Will squirms, feeling oddly vulnerable, exposed almost; he’s at a distinct disadvantage, wearing nothing but his boxers while Hannibal is pressed against him fully clothed.

He swallows hard, hands gripping the shelf in front of him in a white-knuckled hold as the hand on his hip drifts downward, the heel of Hannibal’s palm pressing to the hardening evidence of his arousal without warning. He jerks and gasps, hips instinctively grinding forward into the friction of Hannibal’s hand.

“We can be quiet, this time,” Hannibal breathes. The words are almost a purr, punctuated by the slow, hot drag of his tongue over the side of his neck. Goosebumps break out over his skin, a shiver rippling down his spine.

It takes every bit of his rapidly dwindling willpower to wrench himself away, grabbing a dry shirt and pair of trousers from his closet before stepping out of Hannibal’s grip. “This isn’t sustainable,” he says, starting to pull them on. “We’re going to get caught, Hannibal.”

After a brief moment Hannibal’s hands drop to his sides and he sighs, running a hand down his face as he sits at the edge of the bed. “I know,” he says softly.

Will looks up and he’s already watching him, his gaze slightly unfocused, as though he were somewhere far away. A long pause stretches between them, cold and delicate as a film of ice waiting to be shattered and send them both plunging into the icy depths beyond it.

Finally Hannibal says, “I feel my time in Firenze is drawing to an end. I feel something calling to me, and whatever it is, it is not in this city. Not anymore, though I have come to love it dearly.”

“Yeah,” Will says quietly. “Me too.”

They merely look at each other for a long few seconds. Then Will says, “We’re going to have to make arrangements, if we’re going to disappear.”

“Yes, we are.”

“Will Il Mostro be caught after the Questura find a man with the same profile as you with damning evidence all over his house?” Will asks, moving across the room to perch on the bed beside him. “Or will he simply slip into dormancy and disappear without a trace?”

“The former, I think.” Hannibal smiles. “In the beginning, I was actually thinking of framing you.” He reaches out, his thumb running tenderly over the arch of Will’s cheek. “I would have taken advantage of your vulnerability in the face of sinking into my mind as well as your trust in me, planted evidence in your flat and on your clothes. The night you killed Paolo would have been the culmination of everything I had done. I would have forced you to answer for my crimes.”

Will raises a brow. “Well, I guess that didn’t work out the way you had envisioned it.”

“No,” Hannibal agrees, lowering his hand. “It did not.”

“When did you change your mind?”

Hannibal’s smile twists, turns rueful. “I don’t know. When the time came to begin my plan, I found myself thoroughly unable to move to do you harm. I could not bear the thought of having you locked away. I did not wish to live a life without you in it, and to think it was I myself who would have been the catalyst for it…”

He trails off for a moment, then asks abruptly, “Do you believe in love at first sight, Will?”

Will snorts. “What we both felt at first sight wasn’t love and you know it.”

“What was it, then?”

Will shrugs. “Obsession, maybe. Curiosity. A desire to possess, a desire to be seen and known.”

Hannibal cocks his head ever so slightly to the side. “Is that not, in its own monstrous way, a kind of love?”

Will says nothing, merely looking at him.

“Most of what we do,” Hannibal says, “most of what we believe, is motivated by love and desire. When we allow ourselves to want, to fantasize and to dream, we allow the entirety of

our potential to come to light. We are made of our desires, Will; they manifest themselves in our actions and in our words, in our choices."

"We've both made no dearth of choices on love's account."

"Nor desire's." Hannibal turns to look at him. The shadow of the rain streaking the windows falls on his face, translucent silhouettes of cascading droplets sliding down his face like tears. He's beautiful in the colorless dimness, like the portrait of a mourning angel rendered in shades of gray. "Be it a selfish or altruistic one."

"We still have a few choices left to make," Will says. "Before all of this comes to an end."

"And as we lie in wait for something else to begin." Hannibal reaches out to take his hand, their fingers tangling together where they rest on the sheets. "We are just getting started, *amore carissimo*. This has been a mere prologue in the epic that is yet to come."

"I don't want to leave Florence," Will says, and his voice is pitifully small, guttering like a candleflame threatening to go out even at the faintest of sighs. "Even though I know we have to."

"There comes a moment when stagnation turns to rot, and the only way to prevent it is to grow." Hannibal lifts their entwined hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to the backs of his knuckles. "I feel the beginnings of decay sticking to the soles of my feet and dragging me downward when I walk the streets of this city, regardless of my fondness for it."

"Then maybe it's time to leave." Will sighs, running a hand through his hair. It's still damp, beginning to frizz gently in the humidity building in the room. "The Questura, they're beginning to get truly desperate. They always wanted to catch you, but now it's become more than that—they *need* to catch you. Or, they need to catch someone. We can't leave Florence until Il Mostro is caught and apprehended."

"Then caught and apprehended he shall be." Hannibal leans back, the mattress dipping beneath his hands as he braces them behind him. "We can slip away then, and take no suspicion with us. But before that, Il Mostro di Firenze must take one last victim with him."

Will thinks of flinty gray eyes that glint with anger and suspicion, thinks of the blade of a knife in his hands sinking into the yielding flesh of a throat and coating him in heavy wet warmth. Thinks of how he had dragged in lungful after lungful of the hot iron stench of it as though he could never get enough, how it made power surge through his veins in a euphoric flood. How much he aches to feel it again.

"Yes," he says. "He does."

Hannibal has always rooted more for the demon Mephistopheles than for the titular Faust.

He has always fostered a certain contempt for the virtuous scholar, unwilling to believe that anyone would remain entirely uncorrupted by the transcendence that the Devil offered him and skeptical of the paltry loophole that he had exploited in order to escape his bargain and join his love in Heaven's golden halls.

The Devil, on the other hand, presents him with a far more fascinating quandary. An intertwisted web of motivations and intentions that is impossible to untangle and decipher and a volatility that commands the gaze make him a concoction of peculiarities that is far more enjoyable on the tongue.

He has harbored a strange kind of interest in this particular opera ever since he had first seen it in Paris as a boy with Robertus and Murasaki—a debate about the shortcomings of piety and the weakness of humanity at the dinner table that night had earned him a belt to the back, seven lashes laid like lines of fire into his skin—and he has seen countless iterations and interpretations of it since then. However, every single one of them ends the same way: Faust cheats Mephistopheles and escapes his eternal punishment, saved by God through his striving to live and atone.

He is yet to see a troupe who dare to adapt the darker, more lush interpretation of the original folk tale; allowing Faust to succumb to the Devil's gentle coaxing, unraveling like a skein of yarn into a single unending length of unspooled thread that Mephistopheles can then weave as he pleases. Seeing him turn his back on God and embrace the Devil's beautiful chaos.

The company performing the opera tonight are exceptional—their soprano in particular is spectacular, her strong, rich voice soaring through the auditorium, full to the brim with passion—but the path they take is a conventional one, showing Faust as a man of ultimate goodness and Mephistopheles as his mere shadow: evil and nothing more.

Nevertheless Hannibal is mesmerized by the performance, the particularities of their movements and the intonation of their voices, the subtle shifts in their expressions and

mannerisms he can see even from the box they are seated in a ways away from the stage.

Until he feels Will's fingers brush his knee.

Briefly broken from his reverie Hannibal returns to himself, not turning to look at him but not dismissing it entirely; when Will's hand does not move again he assumes it to be an accident and refocuses on the opera, pinpricks of heat beginning to rise beneath his collar. He attributes it to the stuffiness of the box, and seeks not to dwell on it too long.

Fifteen or so minutes later, Will does it again. This time his hand lingers, the backs of his fingers grazing the space just above Hannibal's knee and staying there, the touch clearly entirely intentional.

He chances a glance sideways. Will is watching the performance intently, eyes fixed on the stage and countenance stubbornly unreadable. His hand remains on Hannibal's knee.

Just as Hannibal turns away again, it moves upward an inch.

Slowly and near-imperceptibly over the course of the next and final act Will's hand inches up the length of his thigh, the touch never invasive, merely conspicuous in its weight on his skin. Every time Hannibal turns to look at him he remains engrossed by the performance, artless.

By the time they're nearing the end of the final act he's begun tracing meandering little patterns on Hannibal's thigh with the tips of his fingers, never straying further than is seemingly appropriate but for the occasional gentle stroke straying dangerously high. Soon enough Hannibal is aware of nothing else, even the beauty of the performance fading into his periphery in the wake of the touch that makes every nerve ending beneath it flare up like an ember kindling into a bonfire.

Once the opera ends in a deafening, beautiful crescendo Will draws his hand away as they stand to applaud, still hardly glancing in Hannibal's direction. The crowd begins to disperse as the doors open, the silence broken open by a low din of murmuring voices. Finally Will turns to him, eyes glittering in the dimness, and simply says, "Shall we?"

Hannibal nods, taking Will's proffered arm and allowing him to tug Hannibal outside and into the lavish common room that's filling rapidly already, the air thickening quickly with conversation and cigarette smoke and the clink of crystal glasses. They're discovered soon enough by Signora Morelli and her little pack, all of them charmed and delighted as ever to see Will on his arm.

He's striking in his bloodred suit with his hair slicked back, the first two buttons of his black dress shirt undone so as to bare the hollows of his collarbone. Hannibal has caught more than a few eyes lingering in his direction, and covetous as Hannibal is of him he can hardly blame them; Will is flushed and beautiful beneath the golden lights, and even more so after he excuses himself a moment to duck into the bar, returning with three fingers' worth of whiskey loosening the taut line of his shoulders.

"I need a few drinks in me if I'm going to be limber enough to socialize," he murmurs by way of explanation into Hannibal's ear, lips brushing the sensitive skin there. His breath is

warm and smells of scotch and burnt sugar, and Hannibal holds back a shiver.

They make polite small talk for most of the evening before making their excuses, and by the time they step outside into the rain-cooled night air Will's eyes are bright and sparkling from the four glasses of whiskey he had knocked back over the course of the evening, his cheeks pink and his every movement languid and careless. Hannibal wants to kiss him till he bleeds.

He lays his head on Hannibal's shoulder on the way home, arms wrapped firmly around his waist where he's squeezed behind him on his bike. Hannibal can feel the fever-warmth of his skin radiating outward even through the fabric of his jacket, feel his heart hammering against his spine.

The night is quiet and still when they pull up at Will's little building as if it were holding its breath and waiting for something, without even the musical chirp of crickets to fracture it. Will slides off the bike behind him, taking off his helmet and running a hand through his hair. It springs free in a mass of dark curls and the sudden stab of desire that skewers through Hannibal almost startles him in its potency, crushing the air from his lungs for a moment.

Will's eyes glint in the semidarkness, and though his expression doesn't shift Hannibal know that he sees it, feels it coloring the air between them like a live wire crackling with energy. His mouth curves up into the barest of smiles.

"Good night, Hannibal," he says, and turns to leave.

"Wait," he calls. It's more reflex than anything else—he feels suddenly as though he's not in control of his own body, as if he were watching himself through a misted windowpane, unable to see anything but a faint, blurred outline.

Will turns. "Yeah?"

Hannibal swallows hard. He feels strangely nervous and apprehensive, shy almost. Only Will, he thinks—only Will could peel away every last layer of his poise and self-control like this and flay him open to his raw, bloody core, pry his ribs apart to reach his heart and cup it in the palms of his hands.

He's hesitated for far too long. Will's little smile widens, seeing and sensing Hannibal's uncharacteristic diffidence, the way he clearly wants something but is almost afraid to ask, delighting in it, even. He's never more beautiful than when he's cruel.

"Would you like to come upstairs?" he asks.

Wordlessly, all Hannibal can do is nod.

They let themselves in quietly so as not to disturb Emiliano or Winston, ascending the steps to Will's apartment in silence. The door falls shut behind them and Will draws him down almost immediately, a hand warm and tingling on the back of his neck as he pulls him in for a kiss.

Hannibal sighs against his mouth, his eyes slipping shut as he catches Will up against him, their bodies pressing up against each other and slotting together like lock and key, like two notes in a symphony written to be played only with each other, dissonant with any other but impossibly harmonious when played together. Nobody has ever fit against him the way Will does.

Will draws away a few moments later, eyes half-lidded and lips parted, hunger carved into every line of his face. He reaches out, placing a careful hand on the side of Hannibal's face. He draws him close again, their lips brushing in the barest of kisses, and murmurs against his mouth, "Be good and strip for me, baby."

The words hit him like a punch to the gut, knocking the breath out of him for a moment. It doesn't even cross his mind to disobey or even hesitate; he reaches up to discard his jacket with fingers that shake in his haste to shed it as Will steps back to watch, lips parted and glistening, high color in his face.

He shucks off his waistcoat next, dropping it beside his jacket. On any other night he would pause to fold them, ensure that the fabric doesn't wrinkle or fade, but right now he cannot fathom slowing even for a moment, too dazed and impatient to do anything but give Will what he desires as quickly as he can.

He tugs his tie free of its knot, pulling it from his collar. He makes to toss it aside as well when Will stops him, a hand reaching out to encircle his wrist.

"I'll take that," he says, gently prying it from Hannibal's fingers. He dips his chin in a nod, gesturing for Hannibal to continue divesting himself of his clothes.

Mouth dry, he complies, making quick work of his shirt and his shoes before his hands fumble at the buckle of his belt next. The room is silent but for the sound of their heavy breathing and the soft thuds of fabric hitting the floor, and the roar of his own pulse he can hear in his skull like a thunderous metronome.

He kicks his discarded trousers aside, almost dizzy now with arousal and anticipation. Not allowing himself time to hesitate he hooks his thumbs into the waistband of his boxers and pushes them down, baring himself to Will in his entirety. He's almost fully hard already, his cock stiff and flushed and leaking, but he can hardly bring himself to care.

Will wastes no time, stepping forward and dragging him down into a kiss, tongue probing insistently at the seam of Hannibal's lips. He acquiesces willingly, allowing him to lick into his mouth, gathering the taste of him and drawing upon his lips as though he were incredibly thirsty.

He pulls away far too quickly, and the noise it punches from Hannibal is low and desperate, almost a keen. Will shushes him gently but no less commandingly, beginning to press a hard, quick line of kisses down the column of his throat and down to his chest. He drops to his knees, his path of kisses trailing down his abdomen, then lower and lower until—

Hannibal curses aloud when Will's mouth closes without warning around his cock, taking him in all the way to the back of his throat in a single swallow. His vision whites out halfway,

searing pleasure like molten fire pooling in his stomach and spreading its burning fingers outward until it feels as though his whole body has been set ablaze. One of his hands spears into Will's curls, not pulling him forward but merely anchoring himself, giving himself something to hold on to lest his knees give way.

Will moans around his cock and the sound thrums through his marrow, making another shudder rip its way up his spine. Will pulls his head back slowly, his tongue working deftly at the underside of Hannibal's shaft until only the tip rests on his tongue. He casts his eyes upward then, shimmering liquid blue with tears of exertion, and looks directly at Hannibal as he closes his lips around the head of his cock and *sucks*.

The moan that scrapes past his throat is raw and loud in the quiet, and he squeezes his eyes shut and tightens his fingers in Will's hair to keep himself from coming on the spot. His head tips backward, throat working furiously as Will's hands come up to grip the backs of his thighs in a bruising hold, nails digging in.

He takes Hannibal's cock in all the way to the hilt again, making low, soft sounds of pleasure as Hannibal's fingers clench vicelike in his hair, hips thrusting instinctively into the wet, inviting heat of his mouth. He's not going to last long at this rate—and Will is counting on it, he knows, knows that it's exactly what he wants, for Hannibal to unravel at the seams, come apart in a thousand shards at his feet.

It doesn't take much longer beneath the combined assault of Will's tongue and lips to send him straight to the edge, his whole body wracked with shudders and his hips grinding reflexively deeper into Will's throat. Will doesn't stop him, merely presses closer with a hum and hollows out his cheeks, making the coil of sensation low in his spine corkscrew almost painfully tight before it finally gives way.

All the breath in his lungs leaves him in a single overwhelming rush and then he's shaking apart with a gasp, the sheer force of his orgasm making his vision go white for a split second. He feels his toes curl on the wooden floors, feels aching waves of pleasure crest up his body until it feels as though he's floating, blissfully separate from his body but still acutely aware of Will's mouth still on him, swallowing around his cock.

When he returns to himself Will is still there, wringing every last drop of pleasure from his body until the friction becomes almost painful, his spent, softening cock giving a feeble twitch where Will's lips are still wrapped around it.

It's only after Hannibal makes a soft sound of discomfort that he draws back, lips swollen and flushed and wet, tears half-dried in sticky trails of salt down his cheeks. He stands, a hand gripping Hannibal's shoulder for balance, then leans in to kiss him.

He can do little more than barely keep up, still half-disoriented and lax, his limbs heavy and useless. He sucks on Will's tongue as it pushes into his mouth, taking what he offers and giving as much as he can in return. Will gently pushes him back towards the bed, not breaking the kiss as he leans down over him. He pulls away to take in a breath, a hand braced on Hannibal's chest, fingers forming a cage directly over his hammering heart.

“Lie back,” he says, and his voice is hoarse and wrecked, scraping past his bruised throat. “And don’t move.”

Hannibal swallows, doing as he says. Will steps back and away from the bed, still breathing hard as he finally begins to remove his own clothing, his every move short and impatient. Once he’s bare he stoops to pick up his own tie where it lies on the floor beside the rest of his clothes, then gets on the bed to straddle Hannibal’s hips.

“Give me your hands,” he says.

Silently, Hannibal does. Will loops both their ties around each of his wrists, securing them firmly to the bedposts above his head and effectively restraining his arms, leaving him entirely at Will’s mercy. His hands are deft on the silk, the ease with which he knots them betraying his years of practice with tying fishing lures by hand.

When he seems satisfied he leans back, surveying Hannibal spread out beneath him as if given up in offering, like a feast set out solely for him. And he is, Hannibal’s vulnerability and his defenselessness belonging to him alone. No one else can see him like this, have him like this. It will only ever be him.

He shifts where his thighs bracket Hannibal’s hips, the hard line of his cock brushing against Hannibal’s and making him jerk upward with a groan. Will’s hands reach out to loosely take hold of his throat, thumbs dragging over the underside of his jaw.

“Shh,” he murmurs, brows drawing together. “We have to be quiet, remember?”

He grinds his hips forward again, making Hannibal grit his teeth to stay silent. His wrists strain where they’ve been restrained but Will’s knots hold firm, the bedframe merely rattling threateningly as he yanks on it.

“Will,” he says, and he sounds weak and desperate, so unlike himself that he almost doesn’t recognize his own voice. “Please.”

“Please what, baby?” He leans down, hands running over the length of his thighs as he presses his lips to his hip, sucking a bruise into the skin there. “Tell me what you want.”

“Only you.” His wrists pull at their ties again, his hands aching to reach out and touch, to fill themselves with Will. “All of you.”

“Then you can have me.” He presses another kiss to his skin, this time to the sensitive skin on the inside of his thigh. He slides down Hannibal’s body slowly, palms smoothing down the expanse of his legs and carefully lifting them over his shoulders as he settles between Hannibal’s spread thighs.

Hannibal’s head falls back against the pillows, a harsh breath escaping his mouth at the first brush of Will’s mouth over his entrance, his tongue following soon after and making him bite his tongue hard to keep from crying out. Will’s fingers are digging into the meat of his thighs, his breath hot and his tongue even hotter as he surges forward, breaching the tight ring of muscle and pushing inside him.

Thoroughly restrained as he is Hannibal can do little more than gasp and twitch feebly with every stroke of Will's tongue, his cock beginning to fill between his legs once more. Will pushes one of his legs up, bending his knee to spread him open wider, stretching him open with his tongue. He withdraws for a moment and Hannibal hears the soft clink of glass before a slick finger follows, meeting little resistance as he slides it forward all the way to the knuckle.

He alternates between his tongue and two oil-slick fingers as he prepares Hannibal slow and thorough, deliberately avoiding his prostate but for stray brushes that make white-hot bolts of pleasure travel up his spine like shocks. He's murmuring sweet words Hannibal can hardly hear through the rush of his own pulse in his ears and the sound of his breaths sawing in and out of his lungs, making him feel almost lightheaded.

After what feels like years and minutes all at once Will draws away, breathing hard. He drizzles more oil on his hand before taking himself in hand to slick himself up and Hannibal's mouth *waters*, his cock almost painfully hard again.

Will hauls Hannibal's legs around his hips, bracing himself with a hand pressing into the mattress beside his head as he lines himself up, saying his name and asking softly if he's ready before pushing in slow and careful.

Hannibal's legs fall open wider almost immediately to accommodate the sudden stretch, ankles locking at the small of Will's back. He's panting, the onslaught of sensation near-overwhelming in its intensity as Will closes every last inch of space between them, their hips slotting together as he sheaths himself inside Hannibal entirely.

"God, you feel so good." Will exhales raggedly, hands coming to rest on Hannibal's chest, palms flat against his ribs and fingers clenching gently into the hair dusting the skin there. "So good, Hannibal."

"Will," he manages, breathless and so perfectly full, split open around Will in the best possible way. Tears spring to his eyes, and try as he does to blink them away they refuse to disappear, pricking against his lashes.

"You told me once," Will says, leaning down over him, the shift in angle making the head of his cock grind against his prostate and sending a dart of sensation tearing through him like an arrow, "that if you ever ate me, you would try to honor every part of me. That you would try to keep as much of me inside you for as long as you could."

"Yes," Hannibal breathes.

"This is better, isn't it?" He thrusts his hips shallowly into Hannibal's, making him arch up with a moan. "Easier. Feels better, too."

He leans back in a fluid motion, hands taking hold of Hannibal's hips as he begins to move in earnest, every long, slow thrust making him see stars. He draws out almost fully before pushing back in, tilting Hannibal's hips upward to hit his prostate with every one. He's so achingly full of feeling that he feels as though he might splinter, pleasure pooling between the cracks that open up on the surface of his skin.

Will's eyes devour every inch of his skin as if to glut himself on the mere sight of him, Saint Sebastian bound and pierced through with arrows, martyred for a God he loved so in secret. Hannibal's devotion is tenfold, hundredfold even, his love a brutal, bloody beating heart held in the palm of Will's hand.

Will's patience wanes soon enough, his thrusts growing quicker, more erratic, hips stuttering every time he draws back. Content to lie back and take everything that's being given to him Hannibal merely arches up underneath him, legs tightening around Will's waist to press him closer every time their hips slam against each other. It's just shy of too much, teetering deliciously on the precipice between pleasure and pain.

Shaking fingers still sticky with oil slide down his chest, wrapping around his aching cock. It sends a jolt through him, and a breath hisses from between his teeth as Will strokes him messily in tandem with every thrust, sending him careening once more towards the brink.

Will falls apart first, a ragged moan tearing past his throat as he stills inside Hannibal, eyes glassy and mouth open, the flush in his cheeks going all the way down his chest. Warmth fills Hannibal until he feels as though he will burst from it, and it's enough to send him over and down.

He thinks he may lose consciousness for a moment or two, drifting in some faraway space where the stars descend from their roost in the sky and explode in his eyes in a blinding, polychromatic eruption of light and heat and color. When he comes to again he's lying on the bed, hands still tied, with Will slumped on top of him, his hair tickling his throat.

Eventually there is movement; shifts and turns and murmurs, Will's fingers loosening the knots on his wrists and rubbing the soreness away, lifting them to his lips and gently kissing the places where the silk had cut raw indents into his skin. He murmurs for Hannibal to stay where he is, then disappears into the bathroom, emerging a few minutes later with a damp towel.

He carefully wipes him clean, placing soft kisses on every inch of skin he can reach. When he seems satisfied he wipes his own body clean, then tosses the towel onto the table by the bed and slides beneath the covers beside Hannibal.

"Will," he mutters, exhaustion weighing his eyelids, and Will shakes his head, leaning forward to drop a kiss on the tip of his nose.

"Go to sleep, Hannibal," he says. "We can talk tomorrow."

"I love you," he manages, and the last thing he sees is Will's smiling mouth shaping the words back to him before sleep finally drags him under.

Chapter End Notes

hannibal being topped is something that can be so personal

La Somma Sapienza

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The blade of the knife glides effortlessly through the meat beneath it, flesh and muscle and sinew parting easily under its razor-sharp serrated edge. Will watches, fascinated, as the stringy tissue of the heart on the counter in front of him comes apart like torn seams, springing asunder as he slashes through it.

The air in the kitchen is heavy and rich, a veritable feast for the senses; the smell of butter and cooking meat rising from the stove, the strains of Ravel's M. 19 trickling from the gramophone, the fragrant smoke not quite yet dispersed by the open window wafting through the room. It rests comfortably against his awareness, just heavy enough not to be overwhelming.

Cooking with Hannibal has become a strange kind of fixture in his life now, as steadying and calming as fishing with his dad used to be. The methodical movements of it have become familiar already, mincing and cutting and stirring, and he can allow his mind to skitter away as his muscles move of their own volition.

Some nights, the meat makes him hesitate. He's waded far too deep into this to fight the current now, but his hands go still on the handle of the knife all the same. He looks down at the raw cuts, the organs, the tongues and the arms and the legs, and he sees the bodies of the people they belong to instead, sees the accusation and the horrified betrayal that shines in their eyes as they look at him.

Tonight, he sees only flesh. He slices into the heart with a practiced ease, cutting it into neat, even pieces before setting the knife aside. Moving to the stove, he places them carefully into the pan where they sizzle gently, their edges beginning to crisp and brown.

He turns the heat down, placing a lid on top of the pan before picking up his half-full wineglass where he had left it on the counter, taking a generous sip as he steps towards the counter where Hannibal is pitting plump black olives, their juice staining his fingertips brown. Will props an elbow on the stainless steel surface across from him, resting his chin on the heel of his hand.

"How is the plan coming along?" he asks.

Hannibal glances up at him, eyes warm. His hands continue their quick, effortless ministrations, gently crushing the olives beneath the knife's level blade. "Well enough. I've made all the necessary arrangements."

"Tell me."

Hannibal lifts the knife, swiping a careful finger along the flat of the blade to clean it. "I have been planting evidence on a colleague of mine for a few weeks, someone who works with me

at the university," he says. "Now all that is left to do is slip into his house and leave the rest of it there the day before we make the tipline call. It will be easy enough; he has an important surgery in around a week, one that will require him to be at the hospital for several hours at least."

"And he'll be caught with what, exactly?"

"Human meat from the bodies discovered recently in his fridge, organs corresponding with the ones taken and DNA from other bodies in his clothes, along with bone fragments and parts of the other bodies in his fertilizer."

He smiles at Will's quizzical expression, and clarifies, "He's rather fond of gardening."

"Ah." Will takes another sip of wine. "That's convenient."

"He has been on my mind as a potential scapegoat for several months now," Hannibal says, his tone almost unnervingly nonchalant. "He fits the profile, and it is easy enough to slip evidence into his coat pockets when he leaves it in the locker room."

"There isn't any other reason you chose him?" Will raises his eyebrows, swirling the remaining wine in his glass around. "Something apart from convenience and necessity?"

"He can be… churlish," Hannibal allows, and Will tries to hide his grin in the rim of his glass. "He favors particular students solely for their parents' influence and wealth, and neglects to give opportunities to the rest of us."

He sets his knife aside, raising a smooth brow as he glances up and catches sight of Will. "Is something amusing, dear Will?"

"You have your patterns and your pet peeves, just like everybody else." Will sets his glass down, amusement tugging at his mouth. "Your methods of dealing with them are… unorthodox, but one could say they almost make you human."

"Almost?" Hannibal murmurs.

"Almost, but not quite."

Hannibal's mouth curves into the barest of smiles. "You enjoy reminding yourself that despite it all, I am mortal; still flesh and blood in the end, bowing to the whims of impulse and sentiment just as everyone else does."

"In body, maybe," Will acknowledges. "Vulnerability can be a seductive thing, particularly when it doesn't show itself to everybody. I enjoy reminding *you* that you're mortal despite it all, Hannibal. I'm well aware of what you are. Moreso than you, even."

"And what exactly is it that I am?"

"The officials and psychiatrists at the Questura all regard you as something entirely other," Will says offhandedly. "For convenience, they term you a monster. They don't know what

else to call you; they haven't invented a word that contains you yet. I doubt they ever will. You… defy categorization."

"And you?" Hannibal looks flushed, his shimmering eyes turned to liquor by the amber light. "What would you call me?"

Will pushes the wineglass aside, leaning across the counter. "Mine," he says easily. "Does anything beyond that really matter?"

The color in Hannibal's cheeks flares, deepens. His mouth opens, the seam between his glistening lips parting and then sealing again as he swallows hard, and Will's eyes cling to the movement of his throat. "I suppose not."

He glances away, and a moment later almost as though he were confessing something he had been hiding for a long time he says abruptly, "Will, I need to tell you something."

Will eyes him, chary. "What?"

Hannibal drags his gaze back to him. "I got accepted into the program at Johns Hopkins."

Will blinks, taken aback for a second. "I—what? When?"

"I got the letter last week." Hannibal is worrying at the handle of the knife on the counter, fingernails catching on the ridges striping the wood. "I wish to go. I might do my residency there, and continue to work as a surgeon in the city afterwards."

"Baltimore?" Will asks, still reeling. He feels as though the time that had until now been moving in fits and starts has suddenly picked up speed the likes of which he is utterly unprepared for, sending him hurtling towards a future he has only let himself imagine in impressions and suggestions.

"Baltimore," Hannibal confirms, nodding. "It has been my destination for many years, Will."

"When…" He shakes his head. "When does the program start?"

"April," Hannibal says.

"April?" Will echoes, half-disbelieving. "That's—that's in three months, Hannibal."

"I know." He's looking steadily back at Will, fingers unmoving now on the knife. "It is unfair of me to ask so much of you, to tear down the life you built here and come with me back to a place that was not kind to you. But I cannot do this without you, Will. Should you simply say the word, we will remain in Italy."

Will sighs, dragging a hand down his face. He says nothing for a long few minutes, thinking and weighing and conceding, then looks back at Hannibal. "Jack did tell me I'd do well at Quantico if I joined the training program," he says finally. "And I've always wanted to work for the FBI. I've certainly got the experience they're looking for."

Hannibal's eyes dart rapidly over his, the way they so often do when he tries to gauge and determine and dissect, to reach into his skull and dig through whatever lies beyond with his bare hands. They both have no small measure of matter crusted beneath their fingernails, remnants of understandings of each other's states of mind like bloody crescents imprinted under their skin.

"So," Hannibal says slowly, "you will come with me?"

"I'm coming with you," Will tells him. "I can't run from what happened forever. Maybe it's time I went back home, confronted it. There's no reason we both shouldn't make something for ourselves there. Virginia isn't all that far from Baltimore, either."

Hannibal is not quite smiling, but his eyes are shining in the dimness, a blazing kind of intensity in his face. "No, it is not."

"Back to America, then." Will reaches across the counter and plucks one of the olives Hannibal had pitted out of its neat pile, popping it into his mouth. It bursts between his teeth, soft and tender. "After we turn to smoke."

"There is somewhere I wish to take you before we go," Hannibal says, still watching him as though he can't quite believe what he sees. "Before we disappear."

"Where?"

Hannibal only smiles. "It's a surprise."

"Well, then. Far be it from me to dampen your flair for the dramatic." Will reaches out and swipes another olive but Hannibal catches his wrist before he can bring it up to his mouth, lightning-quick. Will looks up, meeting his half-lidded gaze, seeing a familiar hunger nestled there like a purring beast curled up and waiting to spring.

"Patience," is all he says, voice low and soft. His fingertips press into the sensitive underside of Will's wrist, directly over his pulse. He's close enough that Will can see the dark mass of his pupils swell further in response to feeling it throb unmistakably against his fingers, can see his own distorted reflection staring back at him through them.

Slowly Hannibal releases his wrist, not looking away from him. So quickly Will hardly has time to register it he plucks the olive from between Will's fingers, placing it in his own mouth. His tongue darts out to chase a stray bit of juice that stains his lower lip and Will's eyes track the movement, a slow, hot lick of desire curling low in his own chest.

Hannibal watches Will watch him, appearing pleased with what he sees. A moment later he smiles and steps back, turning his attention back to the stove. "Good things come to those who wait."

Hannibal looks at *Primavera*, and it looks back at him.

The painting is radiant in the pale golden light bathing the room, magnificent and breathtaking as the first time he laid eyes upon it. The nymphs and gods engirdled by the golden frame gaze out at him, their eyes alight with familiarity and fondness. He wants one day to be able to draw this painting entirely from memory, every infinitesimal detail about it, wants to walk into this room recreated perfectly in his memory palace and allow his eyes to feast upon it as they are now.

But today has the quality of a goodbye; swelling with bittersweet memory and tinged with regret, with the knowledge that he will not see it again for a long, long time.

He cants his head further over his sketchbook, holding the recollection of it in the forefront of his mind. It blossoms to life underneath his hands, each and every petal on the blooms littering the grass and the pleats of fabric swathing Aphrodite's slender white limbs, every curling lock of Chloris' hair caught in Zephyrus' cold wind as he makes to carry her away in his arms.

He has another few hours alone with it, early as he had arrived for his rendezvous with Will. As if solely for him the room is entirely empty, nobody here but him and Botticelli's masterpiece. It is only them, just as it had been in the beginning of it all.

But he is not alone—not anymore.

Hannibal scents him before he hears him; smoke and leather, bitter rage and sour rancor. He glances down at his sketchbook where his scalpel rests in the crease between the two open pages, glimmering innocently beneath the lights.

He keeps his eyes trained on the painting as Pazzi slowly walks towards where he sits at the bench before it, each step careful and deliberate. The sound of each one echoes infinitely in the stillness of the room, ripples expanding outward on the surface of a lake lapping and overlapping until one is indistinguishable from the next.

His shadow falls over Hannibal and he tenses for the barest fraction of a moment—and then Pazzi settles beside him on the bench, his gaze too fixed on the painting before them. Hannibal's fingers rest motionlessly a scant inch away from his scalpel, ready to reach forward and snatch it up should he get even the slightest inkling of a threat. He has already scoped out seven different ways he might kill the man beside him with it should it come to that, along with five alibis and three routes he can take out of the museum to absolve himself of any blame.

"You needn't worry," Pazzi says after a moment or so, his voice low and hoarse. "You will not have to use your scalpel. Not today, at any rate."

At that, Hannibal turns to look at him. He looks haggard and tired, as though he had aged ten years in the few weeks between his dismissal from the Questura and now; there's more gray in his close-cropped hair and in the coarse whiskers that have sprung up on his cheeks and chin, and his eyes are sunken and empty.

"I am not here to kill you," Pazzi goes on. "That will help no one."

He smiles then, a bitter and humorless thing, and amends, "Well, perhaps it will help *someone.*"

"You are quite mistaken," Hannibal says, "about Will and where his loyalties lie, about how much agency he truly has."

"Perhaps," Pazzi says. "But perhaps not, as well."

"Signor Pazzi," Hannibal says. "I think you are a Pazzi of the Pazzi, am I correct?"

"Yes." He casts a long, searching look at Hannibal. "How did you know that?"

"You greatly resemble a figure at the Della Robbia roundels in your family's chapel, at Santa Croce." Hannibal keeps his tone light, polite, allowing the threat to linger beneath like a knife held underneath lace. Veiled but visible, masked beneath a veneer of courtesy.

"Yes," Pazzi says, finally. "That is Andrea de Pazzi, depicted as John the Baptist."

"Then there is the most famous Pazzi of all, Francesco. He attempted to assassinate Lorenzo the Magnificent in the cathedral at Mass, in 1478."

Pazzi looks down and away, his eyes hazed through with shadows. His voice is low and almost contemplative when he speaks again. "The Pazzi family were all brought low that Sunday."

Hannibal glances down, following his gaze and catching sight of the loose pages of a newspaper clutched in Pazzi's hands. It's a few days old at least, fraying already at the sides and the creases so worn it's nearly torn in the places where the pages meet. Hannibal recognizes the headline immediately, impossible as it is to miss in its conspicuousness. This story had made the front page of every paper in town.

“Was he even aware that it was you who framed him?” Pazzi asks softly, lifting the paper slightly. His hands shake, the pages rustling as they quiver in his grip. “Does he know what you truly are?”

“I rather thought you already knew the answer to that, Signor Pazzi.”

“Blame has a habit of not sticking to you, Signor Lecter.” He practically spits the words. “It sticks only onto whom you wish it to. Was it your idea? To take my trust in your Will Graham and my fear for his safety, and use it against me? To have him lie to me and ruin me in order to absolve you?”

“No. It was not my idea,” Hannibal says. “It was his.”

Pazzi flinches back visibly at the words, recoiling as his fingers free the newspaper. It drifts to the checkered marble floor and slides a ways away, coming to a stop near the painting on the wall with a gentle crinkle. He pays it no mind, eyes half-wild as he stares at Hannibal.

“No,” he says. “You are lying.”

“I have no reason to lie to you,” Hannibal says. “We are quite past that, Signor Pazzi, are we not?”

“He…” Pazzi shakes his head. “He told me…”

“He told you exactly what you wished to hear,” Hannibal murmurs, not altogether unkindly. “You were conspicuous in your obsession to catch me, Signor Pazzi, and he turned it into a weapon and wielded it against you so perfectly that you did not even realize what he had done until it was too late. He created a reality where you got what you wanted for a single triumphant moment, and then he snatched it away from you with all the cruelty of God snatching from humanity that which they covet with all their wretched, mortal hearts.”

He smiles, recollection lending a fond lilt to his mouth. “I too was unaware of what he had done until well after he had done it. I simply did what he told me, just as you did. Although I was slightly more aware of what would come of it.”

“He…” Pazzi struggles to say the words, renewed betrayal burning like a fresh brand in his face. “He lied with such certitude. With such… honesty.”

“I told you, your perception of Will’s role in everything that has occurred is a rather limited one.” Hannibal inclines his head. “With all my knowledge and intrusion, even I cannot entirely predict him. I can feed the caterpillar, and whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature, and is beyond even me.”

“He has been working with you, then,” Pazzi says slowly. “Helping you.”

“I would not call it something so prosaic as working with me, nor would I call it helping me.” Hannibal thinks for a moment, pausing. “He and I are one and the same. Two sides to a coin, two halves of a whole. We are each other’s greatest creation.”

“Both of you Frankenstein and his monster in equal measure, then,” Pazzi says bitterly. “Love and horror and hatred, all existing together for yourselves as well as each other.”

“Francesco de Pazzi was hanged outside the Palazzo Capponi here in Florence,” Hannibal says conversationally, as though Pazzi had not spoken. “I have seen many renditions of the aforementioned punishment, some depicting him hanging bowels in and others bowels out. I find the lattermost to be a more… evocative version of events, don’t you agree? Much more visceral, and through that, more real. The mediaeval Florentines were not renowned for their mercy.”

Pazzi’s eyes snap upward to meet his, narrowing to crescents of flinty gray. “Your threats do not sway me, Signor Lecter.”

“Far be it from me to sway you, Detective.” Hannibal pauses, tilting his head with a smile. “Forgive me, Signor. It slipped my mind for a moment that you no longer retain that rank.”

“You may have fooled the Questura with your patsy,” Pazzi says, ignoring the taunt, though rage flashes like lightning in his eyes. “But this is far from over. What is yet to come is only the beginning.”

“Indeed it is.” Hannibal glances at him, pleased. “Firenze was merely the first stepping stone in a long, great path that awaits us.”

“Your Will told me that Il Mostro—that you—are in love with him, and that was why you did not simply kill him.” Pazzi’s eyes pierce into his, burning with conviction. “But I know that is not true, not entirely. Perhaps you believe you love him now, but someday, Il Mostro, your love will turn to hunger. It will consume him, and he will meet his end at your hand, on your table. Mark my words and remember this moment, Monster, when you finally kill the only thing you thought you ever loved.”

Hannibal says nothing and Pazzi bares his teeth in a caustic approximation of a smile before he stands in a savage motion and stalks away, his footsteps fading from the air like the fading beats of a dying, disembodied heart. Hannibal does not turn to watch him go, his eyes falling instead on the newspaper that lies half-folded against the wall, everything he had done staring back at him with a face that is not his.

“And then you fold the pasta like this,” Emiliano says, his hands carefully covering Will’s as he makes a neat little divot between the square of pasta dough to press it into shape. “It is like a baby. Soft and impressionable and prone to accidents, yet more resilient than you might think.”

Will laughs, clumsily copying his effortless movements. “Only you would compare pasta dough to a baby.”

“Food is like a little life,” Emiliano says, turning towards the gently bubbling pot on the stove and poking at its contents with a wooden spoon. “You must tend to it as you would a child, and only when you treat it with patience and love will it flourish, often with a mind of its own.”

“And then you… eat your child?”

“It nourishes you and gives you life,” Emiliano corrects him, giving him a gentle pinch on the arm. “You Americans take everything so literally.”

“And you Italians always speak in aimless riddles.” He swipes a bit of pesto off the edge of the pestle resting on the counter, licking it off his thumb. “Well at any rate, this child is going to taste delicious.”

“Your manners will be the death of me one day, Guglielmo.” Emiliano snatches away the pesto, stirring it gingerly. “It’s a wonder Hannibal hasn’t barred you from his kitchen yet.”

“I’m sure he’s considered it.” Will leans against the counter, watching him bustle around the kitchen muttering to himself, snatching up boxes of spices and herbs before putting them down again. The heat in the little space is near-stifling, and there’s hardly any room to stand between himself, Emiliano and Winston hovering hopefully around their ankles and looking up at them, tongue lolling out as he waits anxiously for them to drop scraps.

It’s so intensely familiar, so *ordinary*. Stable and safe, the way his life with his dad used to be. But that life’s days had been numbered from the start, stamped with an expiration date

beyond which it had rotted in his mind, festering beneath the lie it had been built upon. He had thought—he had *hoped*—that this life would have been different.

But this, all of this, had been nothing but an interlude. A temporary refuge, somewhere to duck away from the storm of memory and reality, to take shelter from it all. But he could only have run for so long, and the truth has caught up to him at last. He has to go and meet it, no matter the cost.

"Emiliano," he says, and his voice is quiet. Emiliano turns with a brow raised, hands still moving deftly as he stirs sauce into a bowl, and the next words stick in Will's throat. He forces himself to say them anyway, hands gripping the countertop behind him. "I'm leaving Florence."

At that Emiliano's hands go still. "When?" he asks carefully.

Will swallows hard. "Soon."

Slowly, Emiliano sets the bowl aside. He turns fully, looking at Will with something almost like concern creasing the corners of his eyes. "Where are you going?"

Will sighs. "Back home."

"To America?"

He nods.

"With Hannibal?"

"Yes."

The creases around his brows deepen. "I know that the two of you… care for each other deeply," he says slowly, almost cautiously. "And I know he makes you happy, Guglielmo. But you have known each other less than a year, and—"

"I love him, Emiliano." Will looks steadily back at him, hands still clutching the edge of the counter. The pressure grounds him, moors him to reality, gives him something to cling to lest he lose his footing entirely and go tumbling into whatever this is that is opening up around him suddenly. "Like I've never loved anybody before. And I never will, again."

"It is not your love that I doubt," Emiliano says. "It is the haste with which you are going. Why must you leave the city so soon?"

"It's not… it was never meant to be a home for either of us. Maybe for a short while, but not forever. I think both our destinies lie elsewhere. You told me yourself once that one day this would happen, that my time would come and I would eventually leave this place. I suppose this is it."

"Using my own words," Emiliano says dryly. "You know I cannot argue with such prudent wisdom."

He smiles. “I know.”

“What will you do once you return to America? Back to fixing boat motors?”

“No, I don’t think so.” He bends to scratch between Winston’s ears as he noses at Will’s shin. “I actually want to take a crack at working for the FBI. Enroll at Quantico, study as a trainee. Maybe even become an agent someday.”

“They would be fools not to take you.” Emiliano clasps his shoulder, his touch warm and comforting and familiar. “You will do good things there, Guglielmo. You will help people, just as you did here. I told you that you deserved only the finest of things, that you were destined to do something great. It would seem I was right.”

“You’re always right.”

“That I know.” He laughs. “You have a big heart, Guglielmo. The biggest heart of anyone I have known, and I have been alive for quite some time. You can do a great deal of good should you treat it wisely.”

It’s the same thing his dad used to say. To his surprise the thought doesn’t make him recoil, doesn’t make unwelcome memories tighten like a noose around his throat, chafing and choking him. Not anymore. Now there’s only grief, sour and sweet and faint on his tongue.

“My only regret will be leaving you and Winston.” He glances up, the weight of the inevitability of what is to come settling unimaginably heavy in his chest, as though every breath he’s taken has turned to lead in his lungs. “If I could ever call Florence home, then it would be because of you.”

“All I did was give you a roof to stay under,” Emiliano says. “The rest you did on your own, Guglielmo.”

“You gave me more than that.” He shakes his head. “You gave me a reason to believe that the world was worth more than what it is, that *I* was worth something more than what I was. I don’t know what would have happened to me if I hadn’t met you all those years ago at that terrible café I was working at, and I don’t want to know.”

“You would have found some way to keep living,” Emiliano says. “You are stronger than you think, and more stubborn than an ox.”

“I kept wondering why you did it.” The memory burns in the back of his throat like whiskey, with the same heady aftertaste. “You had no reason to give shelter to a poor American college student, and even less reason to trust one. I knew I wouldn’t have. I finally asked you, a week or so after you took me in.”

Emiliano’s smile is wistful. “I remember.”

“You told me it was because every boy needs a father, but more than that he needs a friend,” Will says. “And you were—you are—both to me. You did more than just help me, Emiliano.

You did more than just save me. You took care of me, and you taught me to take care of myself."

"Silly boy." Emiliano's eyes are bright in the pale gleam of the lights overhead. "Don't say such things."

"It's true."

"Be that as it may." His hand tightens on Will's shoulder. "You shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because that is the kind of thing you say when you wish to bid someone goodbye," Emiliano says.

Will looks away, his gaze dropping to where Winston is lingering between them, looking up at them with wide dark eyes. He leans down, dragging a careful hand down the soft fur at his neck. "You'll take care of each other, won't you, Winston?"

Winston yips, teeth latching onto his sleeve and giving a gentle tug. Will smiles even as regret and sorrow swell inside him, bittersweet. "We got so little time together."

As if sensing the melancholia weighing the air between them Winston whines softly, snout pushing at Will's hand. "I'll come back," he says, looking up. It sounds almost forlorn, like a promise with nowhere to go. "To see both of you."

Emiliano is watching him with something almost like grief lining his face, and Will has the sudden feeling that he knows far more than he lets on, that he's known it for some time now. Despite it all, he smiles, reaching out to put a hand on his cheek, and Will wonders if leaving him behind will be the hardest thing he's ever had to do.

"You will make something good and beautiful with Hannibal, I know it," he says. "And I will know that you have truly found your home there with him only if you never come back here again."

He draws his hand back and steps away before Will can say anything in reply, turning back towards the counter. "Now enough talk about such cheerless things. Come, let's finish making lunch. You must have something to eat before you go. Will you chop the garlic?"

And because he can do nothing else, as much as he wishes he could tell him the truth and beg for his forgiveness Will only nods, and says, "Yes, I will," instead, and moves back to his side to help him.

“Will,” Jack says, surprise coloring his voice as he pulls the door open wider. “Come in. We weren’t expecting you.”

“I won’t be staying very long,” Will says, stepping inside and hoisting his bag higher up his arm. “Just came by to say goodbye.”

Their home is as warm and welcoming as Will remembers it, cobalt-blue and brown walls and worn wooden floors creaking gently underfoot, small colorful paintings hanging slightly crooked in their frames. The whole place smells of rosemary and thyme, and he can hear music playing from somewhere further in—something lilting and sweet, a French love song perhaps.

“You’re leaving town?” Jack asks, looking taken aback. “When?”

“Soon. Sometime in the next few days or so.” He tugs at his bag again. “I thought that since the semester is over and everything with the Questura has wrapped up, I should probably drop by before I go.”

“You’re leaving?” Bella’s voice asks, and a moment later she appears in the doorway, her expression of surprise identical to her husband’s. “Where are you headed?”

“Stateside, actually.” He tries for a smile. “I do remember being told that with the right field training I’d be able to do some good in the halls of the FBI a while ago.”

“That hasn’t changed.” Jack grins at him. “I’m sure they’ll be thrilled to have you. The kid who helped catch one of Europe’s most notorious serial killers? They’ll all be falling over themselves to get a piece of you.”

“Well, they might have to be disappointed.” He ducks his head. “I’m not exactly itching to get back into the field right now. Maybe someday, but…”

“This case did take a lot out of you,” Jack says. “You’ve earned some rest, Will. Whatever you end up doing, I have a feeling we’re all going to end up hearing about it one way or

another."

He clasps Will's hand firmly, his grip solid and steady. "Maybe one day we may even again in the halls of the BSU back at home."

"Maybe." The smile that tugs at his mouth is surprisingly genuine, and as gratitude strengthens his grip just before he lets go, he realizes he truly means it when he says, "I really hope so."

He's hardly turned around before Bella is there, her arms coming around him as she gathers him close. After a single startled moment he relaxes into her embrace, feeling the sweet scent of her perfume and the weight of the gesture settle like sediment in his blood, no matter how simple.

"I think I speak for both of us when I say we're going to miss you, Will." She draws back, her eyes warm. "You and Hannibal. You are going together, aren't you?"

"Yeah, we are. And we'll miss you both, too."

"What's Hannibal planning on doing back in the States?" Jack asks, moving to place a hand on the small of Bella's back. It's almost absentminded, the touch familiar and easy and born from years of casual intimacy.

"He's going to continue with med school," Will says. "Johns Hopkins."

"Not bad." Jack looks impressed. "Has he got anything specific in mind?"

"He wants to be a surgeon," Will says. "Maybe work in the city after."

"Baltimore is a nice place to live," Jack says, raising an eyebrow. "We were thinking of settling there someday, weren't we?"

"Someday," Bella says, turning to him with a smile. "I think there's still time."

"Lots of it," Jack agrees. "Well, it was a pleasure to work with as well as teach you, Will. And I do hope that somehow, someday it's possible that we'll see each other again."

"Me too," Will says, stepping back and away. "It's getting late. I should go."

"Good luck," Bella says. "Both of you. Whatever comes next for you both, I hope it's kind to you."

Raising his hand one last time in farewell Will turns away the door falling shut behind him a moment later. A fine rain has begun to fall and it forces him to move quickly, not allowing him time to linger as he turns and walks briskly down the street.

His feet take him to his destination easily, familiar as they are with the often-traversed path that leads to it. He could walk this road in his sleep and he does, night after night spent returning here in his dreams. Once, he had been alone in those dreams. But not anymore. Never again.

The gallery is crowded, but the room that houses *Primavera* is strangely empty, quiet and still but for the lone figure sitting at the bench before it, head tilted up and sketchbook poised to capture it. Slowly Will approaches, taking his place beside him.

There's a long, long silence punctuated only by the gentle sound of Hannibal's sketching and the distant echo of the crowds from far away, tinging the otherwise quiet air. It's a startlingly intimate thing, to be seated here with Hannibal at the end of everything, in the place where it all began so many months ago. The tables turn, then turn again, and so the wheel comes full circle at last.

"Do you know what an imago is, Will?" Hannibal asks finally, his voice soft.

"It's a flying insect," Will says. "What emerges as a by-product of metamorphosis."

"The last stage of a transformation," Hannibal agrees. "When you become who you will be. It's also a term from the dead religion of psychoanalysis. It is the image of a loved one buried in the unconscious, one we carry with us all our lives."

"An ideal," Will murmurs.

"Or the concept of one." Hannibal turns to look at him, his face so utterly broken open with feeling that Will thinks he may choke on it. "I have a concept of you, just as you have a concept of me."

"Neither of us ideal."

"No," Hannibal agrees. "Coexisting in the shared expanse of each other's minds as both an image and a concept, as well as a butterfly with fresh blood still clinging to its new wings as it emerges victorious from its chrysalis."

"Not quite ready to fly," Will says. "Not just yet."

"But that is what it has been made to do," Hannibal says. "Even when it languished as a larva it was always destined for something more, something greater. Its potential was preordained, and the chrysalis was the inevitable incubation of a nature that was impossible for it to fight."

Will only looks at him, allowing the silence to stretch out around them once more. Something teeters in his chest, like a knife held on the very tip of a finger balanced perfectly between the hilt and the blade. One wavering movement and it will cut him, drawing blood.

"Come away with me," Hannibal says softly. "Tonight. Right now."

Before them, Chloris and Zephyrus remain reaching for each other as they always have and always will, locked forever in a phantom of an embrace. Trapped forever in an almost-conjoining by bygone brushstrokes they will never reach each other, never have each other. Not truly, not wholly. Not in a way that matters. Not like this.

Slowly he reaches out across the space that separates them over the bench, taking Hannibal's hand. He looks down at the cage of their entwined fingers for a moment, within which lies the beating heart of everything that is to come after this.

Then he looks back up at Hannibal and says, “Okay.”

Hannibal’s eyes are shining. “Truly?”

“Yes.” He squeezes Hannibal’s hand tighter. “Wherever you are is the only place I want to be.”

They both lean forward at the same time, meeting each other halfway. The kiss is careful, gentle, closemouthed and sweet. Despite it all it feels like transformation, like change; bloody, kinetic, *brutal*. It feels like a vow, an oath as binding as fate, a promise they both swear to keep in blood and in breath, come what may.

They break apart slowly and Hannibal is flushed, his eyes turned almost luminous in the golden glow, two bright points that seem to draw in all the light suffusing the room. He’s devastatingly beautiful and achingly familiar, and Will knows that he will never tire of looking at him, will never get his fill of opening his eyes every day and seeing him there beside him.

“Will,” Hannibal breathes, a fevered whisper that seems to thrum in his bones. “I love you.”

“I love you,” Will murmurs back, clutching him even tighter, both of them holding each other as though letting go would kill them both. “We’ll go now, disappear tonight.”

Hannibal nods, hands clenched on him so tightly it hurts. “You could leave a note for Emiliano and Jack, a message of some sort, telling them we’ve gone.”

“I already told them.” He draws back, Hannibal’s hands still gripped in his own. “I said my goodbyes today before I came.”

“Then we have no reason to linger.” Hannibal leans in to press a single hard, quick kiss to his mouth before pulling him to his feet. “Come. Let us bid Florence a fond farewell.”

The train station is packed with people, the little space veritably choking on the crowds that surge through it. The air is filled with acrid smoke and the sound of shouting passengers and conductors, not even the rain dampening the cacophony of the place.

Hannibal's hand is clutched tightly in his, both of them barely staying afloat as they're dragged along by the human current. Hannibal had managed to procure two tickets somehow amidst the chaos—while still being stubbornly unforthcoming as to where they're going—and is steering him towards the right platform.

It would seem he's given this sudden elopement a fair amount of thought; he had pulled two fully packed bags with both their things in them seemingly out of thin air, and had merely smiled and said by way of explanation in reply to Will's bemused look of surprise, "It is always prudent to be prepared for whatever may come."

There's a loud, shrill whistle and then the train begins pulling slowly into the platform in front of them, prompting a fresh wave of people to surge forward. Hannibal pulls the door directly in front of Will open, hoisting their bags inside before stepping up inside it and turning to face Will in a fluid movement.

"Palermo," one of the conductors calls, leaning out of the door a few feet away. "*Tutti a bordo!"*

"Palermo?" Will echoes, turning to Hannibal and raising a brow. "That's where we're going?"

"Yes," Hannibal says. "There is something there I wish to show you before we leave Italy."

"I've never been to Palermo," Will says.

"It is a beautiful city, and many of its intricacies fascinated me when I first saw it," Hannibal says. "The journey from here to there is long but the country is lovely, and there is plenty that captures the gaze even from a train."

In the very edge of his periphery Will thinks he sees a familiar figure in a dark coat and a hat shadowing his brow walking half-hidden in the crowd, stepping quickly into the train through one of the open doors a ways down the length of the locomotive. When he looks again, he's gone, and a moment later he turns back to Hannibal.

"Why are we going to Palermo?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles, and holds out his hand. "To bear witness to the final stage in a beautiful transformation, one that has been long and ardently awaited."

The whistle announcing the train's imminent departure rings out, cutting through the air. There's a low, grinding groan as the engine starts up with the rumble of gears, tremors beginning to wrack the ground beneath his feet. Will looks back for one final glimpse of the city he had come to love so in the last four years, eyes trying to devour as much of Florence as he can one last time before he turns away.

He steps forward onto the train, and takes Hannibal’s hand.

Chapter End Notes

let the gays run away together dammit

E il Primo Amore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunlight spears through the high, arching stained-glass windows of the chapel, their thick syrupy bars scattering into slender beams of polychromatic light as they fall through the colored panes and upon the stone floors. The shadows they cast are long, and he can see the silhouette of the Redeemer's hand raised in blessing where it stretches down the aisle before his feet.

The chapel's pews are lined with kneeling devotees, their heads bowed in reverent prayer with fingers laced together before them, eyes closed and lips moving soundlessly. The two of them walk past, footfalls echoing in the vast, cavernous space brimming with whispers and orisons and the strike of matches; the gentle cacophony of piety.

Hannibal's hand is warm in his own, their fingers interlocked as they walk side by side towards the altar. He looks almost at peace, face tilted up to receive the sunlight as it slips across his cheeks and eyes half-lidded, serenity and familiarity palpable in the ease of his movements, the ataraxy softening his countenance. He's lovely in the light, exquisitely so; even in this burnished and embellished expanse so full of beautiful things, Will finds he can look only at him.

As if compelled by the weight of Will's eyes on him he turns his head, their gazes catching and locking. His eyes are lacquered by the sunlight, richened to dark honey. They fill with warmth when they look at him, suffused with a love bordering on devotion—not quite what the worshippers in the chapel feel for their God, yet akin to it in its own way.

"I first came here after I left Paris," he says, voice pitched low and soft. "Before I traveled to Florence for the first time. I was at once entirely enthralled by it, severe and beautiful and timeless as I found it. I could be found here most days, simply steeping in its splendor and majesty."

They take one last step forward and the altar unfolds before them, majestic and grand and hewn entirely from gleaming white marble, awash with the gentle golden light of lit candles. Jesus Pantocrator rises above it all, his harsh, unforgiving face cobbled together from cracked mosaic tiles looking dispassionately down at them.

"When I first began to construct a palace in my memory within which my past beats like a second heart, it was this very place I chose to serve as the foyer," Hannibal goes on. His eyes are clouded with reminiscence, locked on the altar as if seeing it as it had been then, through the time that has passed. "It leads into the hall of my beginnings, and the labyrinthine passageways of everything that came after."

He glances down, and Will follows his gaze to the tiles beneath their feet. A skeletal figure grins back at him, its skull thrown back and its bone fingers twisted together in a facsimile of

supplication. The ring of marble that encircles it is a deep, dark red the exact color of fresh blood.

“A singular reminder of mortality,” Hannibal murmurs. “Of the futility of praying to a God who is as pitiless as the time that strips the flesh from our bones.”

“Do you… believe in God?” Will asks. He remembers Hannibal’s words to him from all those weeks ago, the revelation he had had at the orphanage that had once been his childhood home—*a distaste for discourtesy and a contempt for God*, he had said.

“Yes,” Hannibal says simply. “Intimately.”

“But you’re not religious,” Will says. It isn’t a question; he sees the distaste that darkens Hannibal’s eyes whenever he speaks of God, the blasphemy he commits with all his careless, ruthless alacrity.

“Not in the conventional sense, no,” Hannibal says. “I do not pray, nor do I perform any rites of worship. I have not been bothered by any considerations of deity, other than to recognize how my own modest actions pale beside those of God.”

“And what actions would those be?”

“God is beyond measure in wanton malice, and matchless in his irony. His love is a cruel thing, Will, savage and unremorseful. Just last week He dropped a church roof onto the heads of a hundred devotees during Mass in a cathedral in Padua.”

“And did God feel good about that?”

“He felt powerful.”

They merely look at each other for a few long moments, hands still linked over the skull graven into the marble floor, the cage of their entwined fingers aligned directly over where, were it alive, its beating heart would rest.

“Come,” Hannibal says finally, tugging gently on his hand as he leads Will off the altar. “Let’s sit awhile.”

They settle into two of the rickety folding chairs that have been set out in rows in front of the pews, the rusting metal joints squeaking and rattling threateningly as they do. Hannibal closes his eyes beside him, head tilted upward and hands folded placidly in his lap, and Will takes the time to allow his gaze to wander.

The chapel is beautiful in its opulence, built as most churches are to make one feel insignificant, humble and meager before the Almighty. The frescoed walls stretch up and up further to the great, arching ceiling, golden beams coming together over their heads and carved with such intricacy that he can make them out from over fifty feet away.

The air smells of lit candles and incense, a fine haze of fragrant smoke thickening the air as worshippers light communion candles, their red glass vessels sending crimson shadows

winking across the walls. They drift around the hall, some sitting and others kneeling, a few of them offering Will a smile as they pass.

It's tranquil, warm and bright, and he finds himself almost lulled by its stillness into a quiet trance. He feels his eyes drift closed as he settles more comfortably into his rickety little chair, laying his head on Hannibal's shoulder.

"What else is in your memory palace?" he murmurs.

"It's quite vast," Hannibal says, and his voice thrums through Will's cheek. "Even by mediaeval standards. I have built a great deal of it thus far, corridor upon corridor and wing upon wing. I have filled it with everything, some things that are worth remembering and others that I cannot bear to dwell upon. I keep those doors firmly closed, but the screams trickle through the cracks no matter how securely I lock them."

"You opened some of those doors," Will points out. "For me."

"I only gave you the keys," Hannibal says. "You did the rest. You entered the foyer of my mind and stumbled down the hall of my beginnings."

"It would share some rooms with my own, I think, if I ever built one." He takes in a deep breath, and it settles heady and sweet with incense and the scent of Hannibal's skin in his lungs. "Boundless rooms in my mind for everything, everyone, that's happened to me."

"And everything and everyone that you have happened to." Hannibal leans his own head against Will's, his temple pressing gently into the crown of his skull. "We would discover each other there, victorious."

"Conjoined and coexisting, in the shared expanse of each other's minds." He opens his eyes then, looking at the saints and apostles looming over them behind the altar, their faces set in hard lines.

"Pazzi is here," he says softly, reaching out to lace his fingers with Hannibal's once more where his hand rests on his thigh. His tone is light, casual. "He's watching us now."

"I know." Hannibal squeezes his hand. "There is little he can do now; it is far too soon to flush his quarry. He must wait, and lurk and think. He will strike only when he feels he has a fighting chance."

"That's going to be soon," Will says. "He may have paid the price for his recklessness, but he hasn't quite learned patience. Not yet."

"No," Hannibal agrees. "Which is why we must prey upon that weakness and lure him away, where he will most certainly move to kill."

"Lure him away?" Will feels his brows draw together. "Where?"

Hannibal lifts his head, looking towards the side of the altar where, nearly concealed by the pews, is a set of steps that lead downward. His eyes are dark and alight with a fierce sort of hunger, and the smile he offers Will when he turns back to him is full of teeth.

“You will see,” he says, and it sounds like a vow, a promise forged in fire and brimstone and blood. “Tomorrow.”

Palermo’s streets are aglow with pale, bright midwinter moonlight, leached of color and rendered in muted shades of charcoal and ink. Beautiful as it is he can’t help but think of Florence and her pretty, cobbled lanes in the nighttime, how the cracked marble archways and stone pillars seemed almost luminous in the darkness, how the streetlights would limn every droplet of falling rain like gilded tears pouring from the sky.

As if sensing his homesickness Hannibal appears intent on dragging him to every mildly interesting spot in town to distract him, from fountains to libraries to carts on the side of the road selling deep-fried balls of rice filled with meat and cheese. They pull them apart with their fingers as they walk, dipping them into the warm ragù sauce the smiling man at the cart had told them was fresh out of the pot. *Arancini*, he thinks Hannibal had called them.

They simply wander awhile, going wherever their feet carry them. It’s nearing ten when they amble into a nighttime farmer’s market filled with laughter and shouts and strains of sweet, cheerful music from the quartet clustered in the center of the square, selling everything from spices to flowers to homemade *digestivi* made from juniper and saffron so strong it makes his ears pop. Even Hannibal winces, though he claims he’s unfazed.

Evidently he isn’t quite as impervious to the liqueur as he thinks; pink-cheeked and loose-shouldered he insists upon stopping and buying a handful of flowers, bargaining in rapid-fire Italian with the vendor as Will laughs and laughs beside him. He manages to emerge victorious with a small bouquet of sea marigolds he’d gotten for a hundred Lire, tucking one of the bright yellow blossoms behind Will’s ear before pulling him into the square to dance.

Later he ducks into a luxurious-looking wine shop and reappears with a far too expensive vintage, flicking open a pocketknife and stabbing the blade into the cork to twist it out neatly. They leave the market and sit by the pier in La Cala, legs dangling over the dock, and pass the bottle back and forth between them until it’s empty and they’re both lightheaded. The wine is sweet on his tongue, Hannibal’s lips even sweeter when he leans in for a kiss.

They stay like that until long after midnight, heads bent together in murmured conversation and trading slow, syrupy kisses beneath the gentle argent glow of the moon. The lights lining the pier ripple gently beneath their feet where the water reflects them, like a mirrored portal to some other world.

“Loath as I am to let you go, we should return to the hotel,” Hannibal murmurs finally, the words breathed halfway into his mouth and smelling of wine and cold night air. “It’s getting late.”

“Mmm.” Will turns to fit their lips together more firmly, capturing his mouth in a languorous kiss that Hannibal returns all too willingly, fingers curling around his jaw and into his hair. He pulls back far too soon, eyes half-lidded and dark, his swollen pupils seeming to swallow every bit of light in the air around them.

“Will,” he says, his voice low, and tiring as the last two days have been it doesn’t stop the simmering note of interest that uncurls in his belly, the desire that begins like the slow-hot burn of coals and threatens to kindle into a bonfire at even the softest of sighs.

“Let’s go back to the room, then,” he whispers, and Hannibal’s throat moves as he swallows, kiss-swollen lips parting the barest fraction. He stands in a sudden, quick movement, pulling Will to his feet.

They end up in an alleyway halfway to the hotel, Hannibal’s back pressed up against the cold brick wall with Will’s hands in his hair and his knee wedging its way between his legs. His fingers creep beneath the hem of his shirt and up his chest, tongue licking into Hannibal’s mouth to gather the lingering taste of honeyed wine and piney juniper syrup.

Murmurs and footsteps eventually chase them away again, laughing and half-stumbling in their haste to reach their destination. The concierge offers them a knowing smile along with their keys as she bids them good evening, eyeing their disheveled appearances and pink cheeks.

The door has barely fallen shut before Will finds himself being pushed against it, the lock clicking as Hannibal’s mouth finds the sensitive skin at his neck. A ragged exhale leaves his mouth as he sucks bruises into the curve of his throat, his breath hot and the fevered press of his hands even hotter as they rove over his clothed skin.

He’s caught off guard when he feels Hannibal’s arms wrap around him fully and lift him off his feet, a surprised noise scraping past the back of his throat as he carries Will to the bed and lays him gently onto the covers. His hands fly upward to his jacket not a moment later, pulling it off his shoulders and into a crumpled heap on the ground, and Will’s own hands reach for Hannibal’s tie.

They both undress each other with hands shaking from greed and impatience, fingers fumbling on buttons and belt buckles, tugging hungrily at fabric until it falls away and bares the skin beneath. The breath between their mouths is hot, wet; they’re both panting, heat clinging to and radiating from their skin.

Once there's nothing left between them but skin Will scrambles backward on his hands and knees as Hannibal crawls onto the bed, bearing down on him with his knees on either side of Will's hips. He kneels over him, haloed by the soft golden light of the lamp glowing gently on the bedside table. A gilt painting of a falling angel come to life.

Hannibal's body lowers over his and Will rises up to meet him, arms twining around his back and shoulders as their lips meet, the scant space between them coming alive with sweet dark heat. Their intimacy is a familiar thing now, both attuned to each other so seamlessly that coming together like this is as easy as breathing, ingrained into the memory of their movements.

It begins slowly, the coals having caught and fanned into a sizable blaze, each lingering openmouthed kiss melting into the next thick and sticky and sweet as molasses. Hannibal's hands are gentle where they drag up the length of his body, slipping on his sweat-slicked skin, but they shake with the force of his restraint, his desire.

Unable to help himself he rolls his hips upward into Hannibal's, and both of them groan at the torturous friction as their cocks drag against each other, achingly hard. Hannibal's teeth sink into his bottom lip, hard enough to sting but not enough to draw blood, and the pain is a sweet, bright point of light that travels in a searing spark beneath his skin, through his blood, in his bones.

He thrusts his hips up again and Hannibal says his name, low and grating, and then he's pulling away from his mouth with a jerk, leaning up as his hands find the meat of his thighs, nails digging in. He pulls them apart slowly, inch by inch, then slides down Will's body in one sinuous movement to settle between them.

Will swallows hard, head spinning. He grits his teeth hard, throat working furiously at the first feather-light brush of Hannibal's mouth over his entrance, his breath warm and his lips even warmer. He's acutely aware of his own heart pounding in his chest, his pulse throbbing underneath his skin at his wrists, at his neck.

He cries out as Hannibal licks into him suddenly, head craning back against the pillows as his hands grasp uselessly at the sheets. Hannibal doesn't give him even a moment, fingers gripping the undersides of his thighs so hard they will certainly leave bruises, lifting his hips and tilting his head to messily tongue him open.

He might say Hannibal's name then, or some garbled variation of it, heels digging into the mattress as he stares dazedly upward at the ceiling that wheels and spins wildly above his head. He feels flayed open, raw and throbbing and leaking, like a wound.

One of his hands makes its way into Hannibal's hair, fingers twisting into the damp strands and giving a sharp tug. Hannibal groans into him and he thinks he can feel the sound echoing in his bones, traveling like pulses of heat lighting up his synapses.

When two spit-slick fingers press inside him he jerks upward with a gasp, hips lifting instinctively to seek more of the contact. Hannibal acquiesces all too willingly, crooking his fingers to press them unerringly against his prostate and dragging a moan out of him. He stretches Will open deftly, carefully; two fingers soon turn to three as Will writhes and groans

beneath him, his wrist angled to send glaring points of ecstasy through him with every deep, deliberate thrust.

His other hand wraps without warning around the base of Will's aching cock, the first firm stroke upward making his vision splinter into jagged shards of white. He makes a choked, weak sound, hips thrusting upward involuntarily into the tight channel of Hannibal's fingers as he strokes Will steadily in tandem with every push of his fingers, pleasure spreading outward from both points and pooling low and hot inside him.

"Hannibal—" His breath hisses between his teeth as Hannibal's thumb runs over the swollen head of his cock, smearing the wetness he gathers over his length to ease the drag of the friction of his hand moving over him. Reality is beginning to fracture, come apart just as he is. "Hannibal, wait."

Hannibal stills immediately, raising his head, their eyes locking. He's panting, hair tangled and with high color in his cheeks, his parted lips slick and glistening. Will can't imagine how he himself must look—legs spread open wide and skin shining with sweat, cheeks pink and eyes black with pleasure. He swallows hard, trying to wrangle his tongue into coherency before he speaks again.

"Not—not like this," he manages. "I want you inside me."

A flash of something utterly fierce and wild flares up inside Hannibal's eyes like a crack of lightning, the only forewarning Will gets before he pulls his hands back. And then he *moves* —so quickly Will barely registers it. One moment he's kneeling between his legs and the next he's on top of him, pressing him down into the mattress as he covers Will's body with his own.

They both gasp when Hannibal sinks into him in a single achingly long and slow movement, his body yielding easily to the familiarity of the intrusion. In the one interminable stretch of time before the distance between their bodies is entirely consumed by heat and skin and closeness he thinks he forgets how to breathe, mouth open and hands clutching at Hannibal's shoulders in a fruitless attempt to cling to reality.

Their hips press together and Will's thighs rise upward reflexively, ankles locking at the small of Hannibal's back to hold him close, keep them as tightly locked together as he possibly can. Hannibal groans brokenly, his face pressed to the crook of his neck as his fingers tighten on his hips, vicelike.

He isn't sure how long they stay like that, entwined and breathing hard, their hearts hammering fast and reckless, throwing themselves against the confines of their cages as if longing to break through the bars of bone and skin and sinew, to wrench themselves free and reach the other. Hannibal's hand slides upward to tangle with his, their fingers lacing together tight.

His ragged exhale is hot on the column of Will's throat as he draws back before rocking gently forward again, and they both moan at the sudden, near-overwhelming rush of pleasure that rushes forth in the wake of the movement. His fingers flex in the cage of Hannibal's, head tipping backward as he drags in a desperate lungful of air.

His other arm wraps around the broad line of Hannibal's shoulders as he leans his forehead against Will's, both breathing hard into the negligible space between their lips as they rock against each other, every movement of their bodies slow and hard and deep. The room is utterly quiet but for the pop and crackle of the fire in the grate and the sound of their ragged breathing, the slick, rhythmic slide of skin against skin filling his ears.

This isn't their wonted fierce coupling, clashing and unbridled, as much about taking as it is giving—this is making love, careful and tender but no less impassioned. There's no frenzied desperation, no wild, ruthless pursuit of pleasure and pain, no clawing at each other's skin to clutch and hold and draw closer.

There is only both of them here, now, the breath between their mouths and the murmurs of each other's names, the thrusts of Hannibal's hips so achingly deep that he can no longer tell where he ends and Will begins. The tides and the shore coming together over and over only for each other, forever faithful to no one else.

Hannibal is whispering his name, his skin damp with sweat and fever-hot against Will's, eyes shimmering in the dimness. His own eyes burn, moisture swelling beneath his lashes as Hannibal holds him impossibly sweet and tender, his tears mixing with Will's where they drip down onto his cheeks. And when he tips his head upward to press their mouths together, the kiss tastes like salt.

It feels like the end of a beginning, sinking into each other as the sun sinks into the sea at twilight, allowing itself to be engulfed, drowning willingly in the waves knowing that morning will come soon after. He is so full of love that he feels as though he may overflow with it, feel it leak out of the cracks opening up all over his skin as he shatters slowly.

When he does finally come apart it's Hannibal's name he says, breathed out on a sigh that he exhales between his parted lips. Hannibal echoes his name back to him as he follows soon after, a choked sob that he muffles into the crook of Will's sweat-dampened neck. He feels his eyes flutter closed as Hannibal spills himself inside him in short, shuddering bursts, heat filling him, marking him.

They stay locked together, eyes closed as awareness floods back in slow and unhurried, breath returning to some semblance of steadiness as the gallop of their heartbeats slows. He clings tighter to Hannibal even as the golden haze of the afterglow recedes and leaves him cold and sticky and sore, unwilling to let go.

"Will," Hannibal whispers against the pulse in his throat, and he shivers at the feeling. He raises his head, eyes bright, face so utterly cracked open with love that Will can almost taste it, bright and sweet in the back of his throat.

He draws Hannibal to him to drink it down, licking into his mouth to gather it up. He wonders if Hannibal can feel it too, wonders if he will bottle the taste of it in a glass vial and place it carefully onto one the innumerable shelves lining the walls of his memory palace. If he will go there when he closes his eyes, lift it to his lips and feel it coat his tongue.

But he won't have to—not when Will is there. Not when reality is more tangible than memory.

“If I were to tell you I loved you every day, for the rest of my life, Will,” he murmurs against his mouth, “it would never be enough. Even twenty lifetimes with you would be scarce, paltry, insufficient, for how much of it I carry within me.”

“Then we’ll have more than twenty. We’ll have more than a hundred. Even after the earth crumbles away into dust and vanishes into the empty space between the stars the essence of whatever is left of us will still find each other, love each other despite it all.”

“We carry stardust inside us,” Hannibal says softly. “The carbon in our muscles, the oxygen in our lungs, the iron in our blood. We can burn forever, then, somewhere in the endless expanse beyond the sky.”

“But for now, we’re here,” Will says. “And there is time, Hannibal. Life isn’t as short as the philosophers and poets would have us believe.”

“Then I will spend every moment of this life, both waking and dreaming, loving you.” Hannibal presses a careful kiss to the corner of his mouth, lips soft and warm.

“And so will I.” He drags careful fingers through Hannibal’s tangled hair, brushing it out of his eyes. “Tonight is our last night in Italy. The last night of this life.”

“And the beginning of another,” Hannibal says. “But there are trials yet to be overcome, and blood yet to be spilled. ‘*The path to paradise begins in hell.*’ If I was to make a parting feast, I would have served lamb.”

“Sacrificial,” Will murmurs.

“I don’t need a sacrifice,” Hannibal says. “But you do. Don’t you?”

“I… I need him to know. To see me. What I am, what I’ve become.”

“The emergent butterfly glorious and taking to the air at last,” Hannibal says. “Free of the suffocating restraints that have held it down. He has a great privilege, one he does not realize. To be on the receiving end of your wrath would be a beautiful, terrible thing. Blood and breath, mere elements undergoing change as all elements do, burning up to fuel your radiance. Just as the source of light is burning.”

“One last victim for Il Mostro to take with him as he vanishes,” Will says. “If they ever find him.”

Hannibal smiles then, and his eyes glint the dark red of freshly spilled blood in the dimness. “They won’t,” he says.

The chapel is cold and dark and empty, almost eerily so. Hannibal had led him around the side and to a door he hadn't been able to see earlier, covered as it had been from the outside by creepers and bright fuchsia bougainvillea flowers that had spilled over the aging wood.

Evening has long since waned into night, and the stars burn cold and bright through the windows overhead as they walk down the aisle and towards the altar. It's quiet, still, the air heavy with a strangely symbolic kind of weight he can feel prickling against his skin. He can almost smell it.

"Here," Hannibal murmurs, leading him a few steps to the side and towards the set of stairs he had spied earlier. Thick darkness yawns beyond, empty and beckoning.

"What's down there?" he asks, his voice hardly a whisper.

"The Catholics of Rome did not consider it holy to burn the bodies of their dead," Hannibal says. "However Palermo was only so vast, and the price of land then was more precious even than gold. As it was, they discovered that there was plenty of space to host the dead beneath it."

An involuntary shiver scampers down his spine, scurrying away into the dark. "So these are the catacombs."

"Catacombs have a great many uses besides being the resting place of the dead," Hannibal says. "They also served as a refuge for Christian devotees during the Diocletianic Persecution in the third century, as they celebrated the Eucharist in secret away from prying Roman eyes."

"Not even genocide could deter their faith, then."

"True faith is not deterred even by death," Hannibal says, turning his face upward to look at him where he stands one step below. "It is only strengthened."

“Fitting, then, that here is where we’ve ended up,” Will says. “The tombs of the dead and the last refuge of the faithful.”

“And one step further downward into the Inferno.” Hannibal holds a hand out to him, the shadows clinging to the angles of his face and rendering him in its stygian chiaroscuro, a stark study in dark and light. “Towards destiny.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Will reaches out and takes it.

They descend the steps together, stepping into the inky blackness that hangs beyond. It envelops them like an embrace, swathing them in its invisible hands as they reach the bottom. Somewhere in front of him, he hears the clink of iron and the creak of hinges as a door opens. Beyond it lies inevitability.

Taking in a deep breath, hand in hand with Hannibal, he walks forward into it.

The torches on the walls are lit and glowing softly, candles half-melted clinging to the niches lining the cold, rough-hewn stone. Their spindly fingers of melted wax have dried halfway to the ground in long white slivers that look almost like bone, reflecting the firelight as they let them pass silently.

The catacombs are labyrinthine, a dizzying array of passageways that unfold one after the other, some turning in on themselves and others leading to dead ends, a few leading to alcoves or circular chambers ringed with carvings of skeletal figures, their dead hands clasped in prayer. The air smells stale and unbreathed, as though these corridors have not hosted the living for thousands of years.

His and Hannibal’s footsteps are near-soundless on the stone floors, their breathing soft and even. His heart doesn’t pound, doesn’t race, doesn’t take flight as they move deeper into the veined heart of hearts beneath the chapel. Two apex predators impossibly different in strength yet conjoined as one despite it all as they stalk their prey.

“He’s here,” Will murmurs. He doesn’t quite know how he knows—perhaps it’s the shift in the draft that blows cold and soft down the passageways, or the faint tang to the air that he had not been able to smell a few moments ago. Perhaps it’s intuition and instinct, something primal inside him that longs for blood.

“Yes, he is,” Hannibal says softly. “Do you know where?”

A fork opens up before them in the dark, branching out three different directions. Will pauses, waits for that gust of cold, stale air to wash over him. He tilts his face up to catch it when it does, eyes falling shut.

“This way.” He turns into the leftmost path, and Hannibal follows without question, staying close at his heels as he strides down the corridor. Anticipation rises like a gleeful tidal wave in his chest, hanging at the cusp of crashing downward and razing entire civilizations to the ground.

The echo of a footstep sounds just ahead of them and Will comes to an abrupt halt in the middle of the passage, sweeping an arm out. Hannibal stills, hanging just behind him. His eyes glint like garnets in the dark, cold and hard with edges sharp enough to cut.

Slowly Will advances towards the end of the corridor, almost holding his breath. Hannibal is utterly silent behind him, and Will doesn't turn, knowing, *trusting* that he is there, that he has his back. He's suddenly hyperaware of the blade he had slid beneath his sleeve, its hilt cold where it's pressed against the steady pulse in his wrist.

He waits one second, then two, then three—then he hears Pazzi pass, stepping away from them and into the next array of corridors.

"Will?" Hannibal breathes into his ear, so softly even he hardly hears it. "He is getting away."

"I know," Will whispers back. "Let him."

When Hannibal raises a questioning brow Will grins at him and breathes, "Half the fun is in the hunt, Hannibal. There's no point if he just traipses directly into us, is there?"

Hannibal's lips curve upward into the barest of smiles. "Not particularly."

"There's a dead end a few turns away," he murmurs, tilting his head in the direction Pazzi had gone. "It led to one of those chambers, and there's no way out but the way in. It seems like a good place to end this chase once and for all, doesn't it?"

"It does indeed, *cuore mio*." Hannibal leans forward to press a kiss to his mouth. "Lead the way. I will follow."

"Are you sure?"

"This is your hunt, your quarry we stalk," Hannibal says. "I am content to be led; far be it from me to come between such a fearsome beast and its prey."

"We can herd him," Will murmurs, glancing up the passageway. "You stay to his right and I'll stay behind him. We'll corner him in the chamber, and then… then we'll do what needs to be done."

"Very well," Hannibal says. "I will double back and stay to his right, and meet you at the chamber." He inclines his head before stepping back, melting into the shadows that swallow him up willingly as if eager to consume him in their dusky maw.

Will turns back around, swiftly rounding the corner. He halts every few moments, ensuring that Pazzi is a passageway ahead of him before moving forward again. He hears shuffling footsteps, soft murmurs and curses as Pazzi steps towards a corner only for a gentle clatter to ring out, forcing him to step away and hurry in the other direction.

Slowly but no less meticulously they force him towards the very last chamber in the catacombs. The floor slopes gently downward the deeper they walk, as though they were inside the belly of some great beast, walking along the veins that lead to its swollen, pulsing heart.

Finally Pazzi steps into the chamber, labored breaths echoing deafeningly in the circular stone room, and Will silently steps inside behind him.

"*Buonanotte*, Signor Pazzi," he says.

Pazzi spins around and Will doesn't miss the unmistakable flash of fear that flickers across his face when he sees him before it vanishes, lurking dark and unbidden in his eyes.

"Signor Graham," he says. "I knew you were here."

"I know you knew." He takes a slow, deliberate step forward, hands loose at his sides. "You're not exactly inconspicuous."

"Is he here?" Pazzi is staring at him with a terrible anger, the kind of anger that hazes everything in red and makes things blurry, indistinct. Will's own vision is brutally clear, untainted, still and calm.

"He is." He takes another slow step forward. "He'll be here soon. I wanted to talk to you once, alone and without pretense, Signor Pazzi. Without the artifice and the mask. I wanted to show you my hand for whatever it is, not whatever I made it seem as though it was."

"No more smoke and mirrors, then," Pazzi says. "No more lies."

"Only whatever lies beyond."

"And what lies beyond, Signor Graham? Hannibal Lecter? Il Mostro di Firenze?"

"No," Will says. "Only me."

Pazzi's eyes narrow, a muscle in his jaw jumping. There's a gun in his pocket, Will thinks, just within reach of his right hand. If he gets close enough, he won't be able to aim for his target before he fires it.

"Are you here to kill me?" he asks.

"Yes," Will says. "I wish it hadn't come to this, Signor Pazzi. Really. But you left me no choice."

"By desiring to bring a murderer, a cannibal, to justice?" Pazzi shakes his head, fury clouding his face. "By wanting to stop a man who killed and ate innocent people?"

"By interfering," Will snaps. "If you had just left well enough alone, we would have gone without any bloodshed."

"You were happy enough to throw an innocent man into prison for your Il Mostro's crimes," Pazzi snarls. "Force him to answer for things he never did."

"We did what we had to," Will says. "But this didn't have to happen. I just want you to know that before we kill you."

Pazzi laughs, and it's a bitter, ugly sound. "Go on, then," he says. "Kill me."

The air shifts slightly behind him and then Hannibal is stepping out of the shadows that shroud the archway, his footfalls silent on the stone floors. He steps forward until he is standing just behind Will, their shadows spilling into each other on the ground before them, merging into one.

"*Buonasera*," he says.

Pazzi draws his gun and fires.

But Will has already moved, flicking his wrist and allowing the blade he had cached there to slide readily into his waiting palm. He ducks the gunshot, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Hannibal lunge to the side to do the same.

He slashes outward with the knife and hears Pazzi hiss as it slices across his cheek, the cut shallow but clearly painful; he stumbles backward, face contorted with pain and fury as he raises his gun again.

His finger moves to squeeze the trigger and suddenly Hannibal is there behind him, grabbing his wrist and yanking it backward just as he fires. The gun goes off deafeningly, the bullet punching into the stone ceiling above their heads. Shards of rock cascade downward in a fine powder, nearly blinding him for a moment.

Will lunges again, driving the blade forward. It sinks into Pazzi's shoulder and he cries out, jerking hard. Will's fingers, slick now with the blood that gushed from the wound, slips on the handle of the blade. It slides from his grasp even as he dives forward to grab it again, lodged firmly in the meat of Pazzi's shoulder.

Pazzi snaps his head backward and the back of his skull connects solidly with Hannibal's face with a sickening crunch, sending him stumbling back with a grunt. Blood gushes freely from his nose and he snarls, lashing out with a foot and sending Pazzi sprawling.

Will leaps forward to snatch the blade from his shoulder, taking advantage of his sudden disorientation, but apparently Pazzi has recovered quicker than he had expected; as he dives for the knife he raises his gun, aiming directly for Will's heart.

Cursing, he throws himself to the side just as the gun goes off, and the bullet grazes his side. He winces, pressing an open palm to the wound as blood blossoms across the white fabric of his shirt, pain lancing through him.

He hears Hannibal shout his name, hears his own blood roaring in his ears as he sees Hannibal's foot come down hard on Pazzi's wrist with the deafening, unmistakable crack of bone breaking. Pazzi screams as his limp fingers free the gun, and Hannibal kicks it aside, kneeling to haul Pazzi to his feet with both hands fisted in his collar.

He shoves him away hard, his momentum sending him spinning—directly towards Will. He yanks the knife out of Pazzi's shoulder in a spray of blood that coats his face as he stabs it

forward again, then again and again. The blade sinks eagerly into the yielding flesh of his stomach, hot blood gushing over his hands.

Pazzi lets out a gurgling shout, so like the one his partner had made as he choked on his own blood at Will's hand. He presses a hand to the gaping wounds in his abdomen and lunges for Will again, clearly undeterred, his other arm outstretched as he scratches desperately at his face.

Will snarls, moving backward, the knife yanked from his fingers as his fingernails dig into the skin just underneath his eyes, opening up ragged cuts. He takes another lurching step forward and Will stumbles back, a hand flying up to his eye to try and staunch the bleeding.

He makes to close the last foot of distance between them and then suddenly he shouts as he's dragged backward with a sharp jerk, blood pouring from the wounds in his stomach. He spins around with a strangled yell, silver flashing in his fingers suddenly. He hears Hannibal's hiss of pain as the blade sinks into his side, blood soaking his shirt and spattering onto the ground where it gleams, black in the dimness.

Something animalistic and barbarous rears up inside Will like a snarling beast, claws extended and teeth bared. It howls for blood, its rage and bloodlust so fierce that, for a single euphoric moment, he is no longer human.

He surges towards him, his blade lying forgotten on the ground, and slams into Pazzi, a hand shooting outward to grip his injured shoulder as Hannibal's grip his arms to restrain him. He cries out, the knife clattering to the ground as he struggles in the hold both he and Hannibal have on him, head tipping backward to bare his throat. And when Will's eyes meet Hannibal's over his shoulder for the briefest of moments, they shine with a savage devotion that he knows Hannibal sees reflected back to him in his own.

Then he lunges forward, and sinks his teeth into Pazzi's throat.

He screams and flails, trying desperately to throw him off. But there is nothing left inside Will but hunger and ecstasy, warm salty blood filling his mouth as he bites down again and again and again, so deep that sinew and skin snap between his jaws. It's a brutal kinetic explosion of taste and color, and as the beast within him roars its vicious pleasure he doesn't think he's ever felt more alive.

He pulls back then, snapping his head to the side with a single brutal jerk and tearing what remains of Pazzi's throat out with his teeth.

Pazzi crumples gracelessly, eyes rolling upward as blood gushes in forceful gouts from the ravaged mess of his jugular. It soaks Will in a scarlet cascade, the hot iron stench of it hanging thick in the air as he drags it down, drinking it in and feeling something almost like intoxicated bliss rush through him as he does.

He rises unsteadily to his feet, the adrenaline that had coursed through him beginning to recede and leaving him aching in its wake. He grits his teeth, pressing a hand to his side, and winces when it comes away covered in a dark welter of blood.

He stumbles to Hannibal's side, hands reaching out to fist in the bloodstained fabric of his shirt. He pulls him forward and they crash into each other, both grunting in pain as their injured bodies slam against each other. He feels almost delirious, drunk on the blood and carnage and the note of pure rapture coursing through his blood.

"Will, Will, my Will," Hannibal is murmuring, his hands warm and wet with blood where they cradle his face and leave smears of bloody fingerprints behind. He can feel his breaths on his skin erratic and quick, feel the flutter of his lashes against his cheeks.

"This is all I ever wanted for you, Will," he says, the words breathed out against his mouth. "For both of us."

Will feels his lip split when he laughs, blood trickling down his chin. "It's beautiful."

Hannibal's hands tighten on his body, his eyes shining with unshed tears. They're both clutching each other so tightly it hurts and there's blood on his hands and in his mouth and euphoria coursing through his veins, and nothing else matters but that they are here. That they are together, at the end of it all.

Or perhaps this is only the beginning—the beginning of something beautiful, something terrible. Something monstrous and holy, something that belongs only to them. With hands that shake with hunger and devotion, he pulls Hannibal closer.

When their mouths come together, the kiss tastes like blood. It tastes like blood and breath and inevitability, destiny high up above crowing her victory as they come together at last in the consummation of their shared carnage. Two monsters entwined, inseparable, finally mated after a bloody, beautiful courtship.

When they part a single iridescent thread of bloody saliva connects their lips, an unbreakable red string that has tied them inexorably to each other since the day they had met, their eyes meeting for the first time beneath *Primavera* so long ago. And it will keep them bound together, he knows. For as long as they both draw breath.

He draws back, taking the first breath of this life, and says, "I'm hungry. What's for dinner?"

Hannibal's eyes shine, and the bloody smile he turns on Will is a beautiful, monstrous thing. "Lamb," he says.

The End

Chapter End Notes

The End!!

i cannot believe this fic is over, honestly. this has been one of my favorite fics i've ever written and that's in no small part because of all the amazing support i got while writing it. i really wasn't expecting to get such an incredible response to what began as something purely self-indulgent and i'm being completely honest and sincere when i say that this story would not be even a semblance of what it is without your kind words and continued encouragement. i'm so grateful for you all and i love each and every one of you. i hope you guys enjoyed reading this fic as much as i enjoyed writing it—i would really appreciate it if you left a comment telling me what you think! <3

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